



This novella from Norway tells the story of a teenage girl who is torn from her home in Argentina and is then, more or less, abandoned by her parents to struggle alone in the harsh climate of England. While her father is away fighting in a war and her mother lives and works in London, Lynette has to fend for herself and take care of her younger siblings. At the same time, she has to deal with the difficult emotion of love for a boy who too goes away to fight as a soldier in a war that continues for years.

'Amazing, tragic and soulful' is the only way one can describe this novella. It is an excellent read for teenagers and adults alike.

"Hanne Bramness writes so that you become oblivious to time and place and can't put the book down."

— Kaja Korsvold, *Aftenposten*, Oslo



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Translated from the Norwegian by
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an eklavya publication

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LYNETTE'S JOURNEY

GOODBYE TO MECHITA

They come out of the bungalow beside Mechita Station, a small group, Father, Mother, Evelyn and Winifred – little sister Winnie. They remain standing on the step in front of the house for a while, as if they are posing to be photographed between the stylish pillars – to have a souvenir of the day they left, but there is no such photograph.

It is early in the day, the sun is setting out to climb the sky, becoming whiter and more scorching, a stifling summer sun towards the end of November. Their stiff travelling clothes feel too hot already, and their hands become glued to the padded leather seat in the big black Bentley.

It is quiet and very bright. The place seems completely abandoned. Nobody has turned up to say goodbye, not the workers, not the neighbours, not even the Station Assistant. But when the car drives off over the white road, some people are standing at the edge of the ditch watching them go. Evelyn glimpses Carmen and Joseph in the cloud of dust, but has no chance to wave to them. Suddenly she is not sure whether they are still her friends. Are they really good enough for her?

Perhaps Mother has been right? And perhaps she will never be able to see them again. She will have new friends in England, many children who are more like herself.

She clutches her hat as the car goes over a bump in the road. The hat has a dark-blue silk ribbon that matches her eyes, not by chance! She gets upon her knees and tries to look out of the little rear window.

“Evelyn Beatrice, don’t sit like that. Sit down.”

She manages to see their low house getting smaller and nearly vanishing into the ground. The smooth tiles of the roof gleam between the trees, the duckpond glitters, so does the sailing boat parked on a stand in the garden. Father built that boat. She has sat on the deck and clung on tightly on sailing trips when he rolled up his shirtsleeves and shouted at the sky. Just him and her.

The flowerbeds in the garden are full of honeysuckle and violets, of red-tongued ceibo and blue campanilla. They smell sweet, sweeter and stronger as the afternoon goes by, before the scent becomes weaker in the evening and cool as dew. She and Carmen have a little marble table under the tree by the pond where they play with their dolls, sit and dangle their bare legs while the grass tickles their toes. The white geese with fiery red beaks waddle over to visit them in the shade. The big birds squint at them with one red eye at a time. Sometimes they suddenly gabble so unpleasantly that one might think they have come to scold, like Carmen’s mother.

My mother never shouts, Evelyn thinks, she never raises her voice. Yes, she can be strict, very strict, but then she has her reasons. Poor Mother! She has so many headaches, is often

sad. The young Station Assistant is attracted to her, Evelyn has seen, but she is not pleased by his attention, no, it almost looks as if he irritates her. When he came with a gift for Mother once, a lovely ring he wanted to give her, she saw that Mother was not a bit pleased. Evelyn’s heart becomes filled with painful tenderness. My mother is as mild as an English summer, she thinks stylishly.

Mother has told her about summer mornings in England when the air is as clear as spring water, when it feels as if one can quench one’s thirst with it. The sun is lukewarm there, not hot, never an enemy to protect yourself from, to escape from. But here in Argentina the sun is hard. We are strangers here, we can’t stand it, says Mother, while her gaze becomes blank and remote.

Father goes out in the sun, in the middle of the day too, now and then. He goes out in the dark Station Master’s uniform, in the cap with the shiny enamel visor that gets so burning hot that it looks as if it is sweating. He stands and receives the train on the platform when it comes from the south. There is a lot to be organised, papers to be signed, goods and animals to be loaded and unloaded. The engine has to be filled with water. The passengers on the trains look pale, almost ill, from the heat. Evelyn has stared at them through the dusty windows. They are going to Buenos Aires, perhaps even further. Perhaps they come from Tierra del Fuego – the Land of Fire – and are going to go out onto the big ocean? Perhaps they are going all the way from Patagonia back to England and Wales?

Now she herself is going to cross the ocean. As soon as they reach Buenos Aires, they are going on board a huge ship, a steamer they will travel in for three weeks!

Evelyn has never heard Father speak English with anyone on the train, but she has heard people speaking English when they raised their voices. She has heard scattered words of the language which for a long time she had thought only her own family spoke in Argentina. But that was rarely. The passengers are generally serious and sit deadly still, while boxes are being thrown in, doors banged and the whistle sounds shrill. Then the wheels clang against the black rails that go right past the garden gate, and the train leaves. The rails sag under the weight of the train, shifting slightly, it can look as if they are not properly grounded on the hillside. She thought she should investigate, and tell Father, but she is not allowed to go beyond the gate anyway.

She knows that the train whistles when it leaves, but the sound always comes abruptly. The noise is painful. It is like something being torn apart. It sounds as if someone is afraid, and what they are most afraid of is about to happen! Evelyn stands paralysed when she hears the train whistle, about to cry.

"I saw Joseph, he had his fishing rod. Do you think he'll catch any fish now?" Winnie looks at her, shapes the English words carefully. She looks even smaller in the big car with her dark clothes on, with her curls confined in a dark green bonnet, so that her head appears very narrow. Winnie nudges her, wants her to answer. But she also knows that Mother does not like them to talk about Joseph. Mother clears her throat in the front seat, but Winnie does not seem to notice. She opens her little fist carefully and says eagerly: "Look what Joseph gave me."

A painted clay whistle, shaped like a beetle, with six little holes on its back. The colours are glossy, sky-blue, orange, yellow. It means luck, Winnie explains. She strokes it.

"Take it from her, Evelyn, and give it to me."

She has to do as her mother says. She prises it out of Winnie's grip. Winnie looks at her, but says nothing. At last she has understood, now she is quiet! She bows her head, and Evelyn sees how her narrow shoulders shake, in the suit that is sewn a couple of sizes too large.

Father strikes the steering wheel angrily, once, like a blow, as if he was out riding and wanted the horse to gallop. Evelyn cringes. He tightens his grip on the steering wheel until his hands become red and his knuckles white.

The little whistle lies in front, by the windscreen, rocking and glistening in the sunshine. The road becomes dustier and dustier and in the cloud of dust, that sometimes resembles fog, the whistle shines. If they had wound down the window, perhaps the wind might have played on it a little, created the hollow-sounding notes, but then of course everyone in the car would have become dirty from the dust. Evelyn has to smile even if she does not feel particularly happy. She imagines them driving into town with their faces and clothes grey with dust. Like dolls. People would have been alarmed at the sight!

They do not attract much attention when they reach the town. Not like Father did the first time he drove into Mechita in the Bentley! Everyone came running to look. There is a lot of traffic in Buenos Aires, quite a lot of cars among carts and carriages. Trams move along the streets, Father has to look out so the car wheels do not run onto the rails and get stuck. The car bumps along on the cobblestones. There are shouts

and hoots as they drive down the wide road, across the river and past the cathedral towards the docks where the ship lies, the big black and white passenger steamer that will take them to London, to Tilbury, all the way to the goal of their dreams.



WHERE IS FATHER?

The gangway swings, threatening danger, as they climb up the side of the ship. When they have reached about halfway, Evelyn glances down for a second. She stretches out her hand and tries to grasp the warm wide railing. She picks out the car and Father far below, he is lifting out their luggage, handing it to some men who are dressed like the gauchos at Mechita. Then he gets into the car again and drives away.

Suddenly she feels dizzy. Isn't Father coming too? Yes, of course he is, but she is afraid to ask Mother. It was for his sake they were going, they had explained that. Duty called. What sort of duty they were talking about, she did not know, but she was sure it concerned him. He must be going to park the car somewhere else. That's what it is.

If only he gets back from Palermo before the ship leaves! Father has a friend who lives near the Guadalupe Cathedral, that must be where the car will stay. Now it all adds up.

Evelyn remembers going there with Father. The dark staircase,

the noise from the corner shop on the ground floor, and the glasses on the table vibrating when the tram went by, made a strange impression. Father's friend was called Manuel Fernandes. He was rather silly for a grownup, she thought. They each sat in a deep armchair in the cluttered sitting room. Señor Fernandes joked and laughed, told them about some stupid Englishmen who had come into the railway transportation office where he worked. She thought Father would get angry, but he nodded in agreement to all that was said. Señor Fernandes spoke to her too. He wanted to know whether her Mother's tummy had become fatter? Evelyn became hot and confused. But then Father said something and both men slapped their thighs and laughed.

Father was different from what she was used to. Perhaps it was the wine? She had seen that before, how he became more cheerful when he drank from the amber glass. When they had company at home in the bungalow, the doors to the garden stood open, and she had heard Father talking in wild exaggerations and laughing uproariously. He was playing up to the women, Evelyn thought. Otherwise he was a rather serious man, of few words, if he was around at all, that is. Even though he was occasionally to be observed outside receiving the train, he spent most of the day and evening in his office, where nobody was allowed to go and disturb him.

Señor Fernandes grandly offered wine and cigars, and dry cakes that tasted of vanilla and cinnamon and stuck to the palate. She was given lemonade in a fragile glass, it was tepid and sweeter than the lemonade Carmen's mother made. But the strangest thing, which made the greatest impression on her, was the bed cupboard. Señor Fernandes not only ate, he also slept in the sitting room, and his bed was folded up in

a cupboard. He told her that. When she was alone, she peeped in through the cupboard door. Yes, there she saw the underside of a bed.

Mother pushes her in the back. "Evelyn Beatrice, you mustn't fall into a trance here, you must follow us."

It is only a small push, but she staggers and nearly falls over Winnie who is walking in front of her up the gangway. Her heart beats hard, so hard that someone may hear it?

Perhaps Manuel Fernandes will give Father wine? Perhaps Father will forget that he has to catch the ship? No, Father won't forget. She had waited for a long time in the sitting room in Palermo that day, stared at the cakes on the tall dish, helped herself to some of them. The two men went out and left her alone. She sat there for hours in the deep chair, it seemed. She felt the vibration in the house when the tram clattered past, saw how the streetlight shone in onto the patterned red carpet. She fell asleep curled up in the chair. But she woke up in her own bed.

Another time, Evelyn remembers, when Father had brought Winnie into the town, she had screamed and behaved so badly that he could not take her into the office where he had to speak to someone. In despair he left her on a bench in the park, near the theatre. He gave her strict orders not to move, he said, very strict. So there she was, sitting in exactly the same place when he came back to fetch her in the afternoon, like a collapsed bundle.

He usually keeps his promises. But where is he now? It should not be so difficult to see Father in the crowd, tall as he is. He always moves fast and swings his arms. That golden hair of his distinguishes him. There is no sign of him.

Now the black smoke from the funnel sweeps down in a hot gust. The ship hoots, about to set sail! Evelyn can feel it moving. All the sounds and shouts are unmistakeable. Oh, good God, is this the way it is? Father isn't coming with us after all! They are going to sail over the ocean and he will stay at Mechita with the horses and the boat, with the picture of the unfamiliar woman he has hanging in his study.

But hadn't he said they were bringing the horses with them to England? They had planned carefully. Carmen's father and one of the gauchos were to ride them into the town, they were to set off before them, at dawn.

How will she and Winnie and Mother manage without him? And Mother's going to have a baby! That is why she is heavy and short of breath. Perhaps that is why she is unhappy? No, it must have something to do with the unfamiliar woman in Father's picture, the woman who smiles so secretively, behind the glass that is so worn it looks as if she is floating underwater. Evelyn has been in Father's study and studied it, even though she knew she was not allowed.

It will not be long till the baby comes. Evelyn knows her mother is soon going to give birth because Carmen's mother has said so. Evelyn had become frightened. How would Mother cope, she has so many troubles already? But Carmen's mother said it was a blessing. But where is Father? How are the four of them going to manage without him?



ON THE ROLLING FLOOR

The ship moves away from the quay. Father has not turned up! But who is that sitting under the large chandelier on the other side of the dining saloon in the evening? Evelyn sees him as soon as she enters. It is Father. He is sitting there as if nothing has happened, as if everything was in perfect order!

The lamps swing so much from the waves that not only the floors but also the reflections of the room in the windows swing. She feels dizzy again. Father looks elegant, dressed up and unfamiliar, the thick golden hair combed down tidily. He is sitting, talking with a man in uniform. Evelyn and her mother cross the floor with staggering steps.

Father looks up and nods briefly to them when they arrive, as if nothing was more natural than that they should meet like this here on the big ship! He gets up and pulls out a chair for Mother, glances enquiringly at Evelyn, she notices without looking up at him. She fights tears. She must not cry here, whether out of relief or anger. How could he just disappear like that? She balls her fists and curls up her toes in the stiff fancy shoes.

Did everything go well with the car and the horses? Mother's voice is thin. Father does not reply, he must not have heard her; there is quite a high level of noise here, a buzz of voices and clatter of cutlery and the man in uniform just said something. Now and then Evelyn also has a suspicion that he does not want to hear what Mother says, that he pretends she is not there.

But the man in uniform looks with interest at Mother and wants to know:

"And you, Mrs Rhys, have you made this voyage many times before?"

Mother sits silent for a moment, then smiles almost secretively at him:

"Never," she replies, "but I came the long way from Australia many years ago to get married in Buenos Aires. That was my only voyage up to now, unfortunately."

"So you are in fact a genuine Australian?"

"Yes, you may say that, but my parents came from England. Well, on my mother's side it was her father who emigrated from Wales. You may have heard of James Harrison?"

"The Meat Master? Yes!"

"Inventor," Mother corrects, with a little laugh.

"Mr Hutchinson, have you served as Mate for a long time?"

Evelyn notices that Father's eyes wander. He puffs on his big cigar. The rings on his fingers gleam, reflecting the

chandeliers. The ship rocks so much that they have to grab their glasses and keep hold of them.

"Second Mate," corrects Mr Hutchinson. "No, Mrs Rhys, I am not the old man, you know!"

Colour comes into Mother's pale cheeks. Evelyn, who is sitting beside her, can see that she is twisting her perfumed handkerchief tightly around her finger, as if she was hanging by that single finger and the handkerchief, and that was all she had to hold on to. Mr Hutchinson has more on his mind:

"In your condition, Mrs Rhys, is it possible that the child will come while you are on board?"

Is it in order to ask Mother straight out about that? She has never mentioned it herself. Is it really permissible to let whoever might overhear know that Mother is going to have a baby?

To Evelyn's surprise, Mother looks into the Second Mate's eyes and answers yes.

Father asks Mr Hutchinson something in a low voice and now Evelyn cannot hear them through the noises of vibration, scraping and the buzz of voices, one glass and another falling to the floor, smashing. She has never seen so many people sitting eating together in one room. They sit rolling up and down, but it does not look as if they are taking any notice of it.

There are some children here, but mostly dark-suited men and women in light, thin dresses, dresses with short sleeves, tight around upper arms and waist. The skirts rustle when they move in them. Women in dresses like that came to parties at Mechita, so Evelyn knows the sound of rustling

silk well, a sound that always makes her uneasy. The women danced with her father. Music and trilling laughter streamed out of the open windows and doors when there was a party at the home of Peter Rhys, prosperous railway engineer, acting station master at Mechita, the most important junction in the country.

Sometimes he himself had sat down at the piano, played modern dixie tunes or tango music. He could sing a love song or two as well. Then he would tip his head back and half-close his eyes, in an entranced manner. The song flooded the room, lightly and naturally, and seeped out into the summer darkness. Father did everything so proudly, so lightly and naturally, whether he rode a horse, swung a racquet on the tennis court, or performed on the dance floor or at the piano. And the paper lanterns in the trees in the bungalow garden, in the lilac, the acacia trees and the lemon tree, swung in rhythm with the music inside the lit-up rooms.

Father kept the hand with the rings close to the slim, glistening backs of the women he swung here and there. Behind the music, under the laughter, another sound could be heard, an even rustling, a sigh like wind. But it was not the wind, it was the skirts. When he sang for the lady visitors, and they stood swaying their hips by the grand piano, the skirts fizzed disquietingly.

Mother does not have any light dresses. Evelyn has never seen her dance, never seen her in anything but dark clothes and straight skirts, for everyday and for parties. She has a pretty white lace blouse with a high neck and buttons down the back. Evelyn knows her back very well, as she often averts her face and turns her back. Her lean shoulders are a

little bowed, even though she walked a lot with a book on her head when she was young. When she was young – in Australia!

Could it be true? Is Mother really Australian? That is what it must mean, if the only journey Mother has taken was when she came from home to marry Father in Argentina. And her home was in Australia. That was what she said to Mr Hutchinson. But what about all she told us about England, then – and so much about Wales! Evelyn has seen vivid green Dorset come alive in her mind, the villages with old churches, roses and bricks, endless hedges along the roads and over the fields with teeming birdlife, shady copper beech trees, and then the mild sunlight, of course.

A summer day in England is alternately yellow as honey or pale grey. Suddenly there comes a shower, a transparent, shining stream, but just afterwards the sun shines again. Then vapour rises with a scent of stones and roses that is indescribably clean, and the air becomes like silver.

In Wales the light is even clearer! A light like phosphorus, a white sunlight that almost penetrates things, the light lays itself like varnish over houses, bare rocks and trees. In both sun and rain, the colours seem fresh and new.

And when winter comes to the British Isles and cold winds blow across them, the hills are still lush. If snow falls, it is like a chalk-white powder on the striking green landscape.

Surely Mother must have seen this with her own eyes to be able to talk about it so vividly? Evelyn has also seen her mother's pictures from England. That must be another proof that Mother has at least been there? Evelyn had always been convinced that England was Mother's childhood

kingdom, her paradise lost, her real home. She *knew* Mother had grown up there!

But when she comes to think about it, there were never any people in the photos Mother showed them, and they looked rather yellowish and faded. She has never seen a photo from Mother's childhood, nor a photo of her grandmother, for that matter. But she had seen one of Grandmother's father, the famous inventor, the first person to send fresh meat from Australia to England.

He had to have been in Australia then. She had never thought of that before. Suddenly an idea strikes Evelyn, and it is clear to her that she is not the only one who is looking forward excitedly to seeing England for the first time. Mother is too!

"Evelyn, it's time you went to your cabin now," says Father firmly.

But what about dessert? She does not say it aloud, but thinks about it. There will clearly be no time for it. She gets up obediently from the table, walks across the unsteady floor. She feels that her skirt is too big, the opening in the side slides forward onto her stomach.

The ship rolls. It goes up and down. On the stairs the next step disappears under her, she is just about to fall and dive forwards. Then Father is behind her, takes hold of her arm.

"You have to hold on tightly, you know."

"Yes, Father."

"Look here."

He stretches out his other hand and gives her something.

"Take it."

She cannot quite see what he is holding out to her in the half-dark, but she guesses. It is something oval, something shiny and cold with small holes in it.

"Not a word to your mother."

"No," she assures him.

"Good night."

"Good night then, Father."

He goes and she is left standing there, stunned. She holds the object tightly in her hand. It weighs next to nothing, but means so infinitely much. It is the clay whistle! The whistle that Joseph gave Winnie.



THE PROMISE

They call at Rio one calm evening. They are to stay here overnight; in under a week they will be in Puerto Rico, then they will cross over the ocean to England. Passengers go ashore, sailors go ashore in a yelling crowd, but some have to stay behind to scrub the decks and clean portholes and windows. They hang on the outside of the ship on ropes fastened to the railings.

Evelyn holds Winnie tightly by the hand as they walk around on deck. Winnie's shiny hair is glistening and her little hand is burning hot. So many lights mirrored in the harbour water, in between everything as thick darkness draws in. The air is very warm, almost like a wall.

Mother lies in her cabin. She has aches in her back and stomach and lies in great pain. The ship's doctor has visited her and said she must have complete rest. Is the baby coming now, so soon?

Evelyn realised, almost as soon as Father gave her the whistle, that she could not give it to Winnie, not yet, not while they

THE PROMISE

were still on board. Then Mother might discover it. To keep the promise she gave Father, she must hide it. But where? First she slipped it into her pillowcase, but then something odd happened. Mother, who otherwise never used to come and say goodnight, suddenly stood inside their cabin.

At Mechita Station it was always Carmen's mother who helped them off with their clothes. She folded them up nicely, hung them over the back of the chair for the next day, and put their shoes under the chair. She gently got them into bed, sat down and sang to them, also in a gentle voice, but a voice with a smile in it, Evelyn thought.

Evelyn was already in bed when Mother came. She quickly closed her eyes. She made a silent prayer that her mother would not come nearer, made sure to breathe quietly and evenly like a sleeper. But she came up to the bed anyway, bent over it and whispered:

"Evelyn?"

What should she do? She felt the hard whistle against the back of her head and lay there as stiff as a piece of wood, with a beating heart. If she replied, she might have to sit up a bit and Mother might notice the little raised bump on the pillow. What did she want from Evelyn? What on earth could it be? Should she go on pretending to be asleep? If she was going to keep the promise she had given Father, she must do so, lie here quite still and deceive Mother.

One thought fought with the other, shouted soundlessly at frantic speed inside her. It was often like this, her head ached from it, she could not manage to make up her mind, only became faint and exhausted. She said nothing. She heard the distant click of the door when Mother left.

She got up in the twilight, took the whistle with her and fought her way up the rolling stairways and out of the heavy door, out onto the deck. The deck was slippery, dangerous. It tilted down when the waves came, and it felt as if she could fall off the ship, slide down into the dark water and be gone. She did not find a suitable hiding place up there either, but decided on one of the lifeboats on the lower deck. So she had to go down the slippery stairs. But she managed it somehow, tucked the whistle in under the tarpaulin in the prow of the boat and took note of the place.

When she got back to the cabin and lay down again, her body was quite stiff and she trembled from exertion and fear for a long time. She had only just fallen asleep when there was a knock at the door and Winnie bounced in and shouted:

“It’s morning now, you’re not to sleep any more!”

Winnie took hold of her and wanted to pull her out of the bunk. But then Evelyn felt her anger rise and she grabbed and pulled her hair. She thrust her hand in among Winnie’s curls and tugged. She saw bewilderment in her eyes. Winnie really looked more surprised than sad. When she began to cry, she did not sob, but cried carefully with her hand in front of her open mouth, then she curled up and wept soundlessly.

What sort of big sister was she, really? She hid the whistle for Winnie’s sake, to protect her from Mother, but then she herself was mean to her! She gave with one hand and took with the other. She was so well-behaved, had such good manners, but she was not kind to someone younger than herself, towards the one who really needed her. Perhaps Mother had needed her help for something too when she came into the cabin and whispered her name yesterday evening?

Evelyn took Winnie in her arms and cried too,

whispered to her and begged her forgiveness again and again. At first Winnie resisted, then she nestled her head against Evelyn’s shoulder. Evelyn was very tempted to tell her about the whistle, but she just managed to hold onto the secret. There it lay, down inside one of the deep lifeboats, safe under the tarpaulin in a crevice between hull and board, lay and piped softly in the movement of the wind when it blew outside.

Now, out on deck, even though the wind has dropped and the ship lies quietly in the harbour at Rio, she must hold onto her little sister tightly, she must take an even stronger grip on her hand so she will not run about. She is too young to understand how dangerous it is. Not only does the ship tower up very high, but the water in the harbour is dark and deep. If Evelyn lets Winnie out of sight here, she might lose her forever. She might get lost among the crowds of people going ashore as well, and go missing in the large Brazilian city. How many people are there, out there? Evelyn does not dare to think of it.

It is she who has the responsibility. Mother is not to be disturbed and she only sees Father in the evening, after Winnie is in bed. It is Evelyn who puts her to bed now, who folds and hangs up her clothes, checks her shoes and polishes them if necessary. It is she who sits beside Winnie and sings to her, sings the same song as Carmen’s mother used to sing in the white bedroom with the flapping white curtains – their room at home in Mechita:

*A ro ro mi nino
A ro ro mi sol
A ro ro pedazo
De mi corazón.*

IN THE HOLD OF THE SHIP

It has become quieter in the dining room of the ship in the evenings. People no longer look happy and elated, they seem anxious instead. Evelyn has heard that going to sea for the first time can be such an effort that people become exhausted without realising it. Then they might lose their high spirits as well?

Father carries on muffled conversations with other men with very serious expressions, who become hot-tempered now and then. It seems that he is not on speaking terms with the young Second Mate any longer.

A few days ago a ship reared up on the horizon and intense uneasiness spread among the passengers. Some of the grown-up ladies began wailing out loud.

That was when Evelyn heard it, when she first understood the word "war". No, that is not correct, she had heard the word from time to time, but had not realised it had anything to do with her. She put two and two together. It might be the enemy who had discovered them and was coming to attack them! But in the end it turned out to be an

English ship, and they had nothing to fear.

They are approaching Europe. Large waves and ice-cold air tell them about a different season. It is winter here on this side of the earth. In two weeks they have left the summer and a whole autumn behind them, so to speak; in a little over two weeks it has become the middle of winter. Evelyn has seen snow fall and lie on rigging and deck, only to be washed away by the sea spray.

They do not go out, but have begun to wear socks and jackets and shawls all the same, because it is cold inside as well, draughts from the windows and outer doors. It has been arranged that a nun from the nunnery in Buenos Aires, who is on pilgrimage to Rome, takes care of Mother. She helps Evelyn and Winnie with their morning bath and dressing. She reads to them from the Bible for a while every day. They draw pictures of the stories they hear.

"Lyn, can you help me with the donkey?" Winnie asks.

Christmas in Argentina is more like the one in the Holy Land than the one in England. Was it not summer in Bethlehem too at Christmas time? Mary and Joseph had to sleep in the stable, but they weren't freezing, were they? Baby Jesus did not need to be wrapped up so well when he lay in the crib, because the first Christmas Eve was almost like a summer's night, surely not as cold as in England.

Suddenly Evelyn thinks of the horses, Mawr and Negro, she had nearly forgotten them. How are they getting on? She asks Father in the evening.

"So that's what you're wondering about," he replies.

"Yes."

"Let's go and take a look," he says.

Surely that isn't necessary! She didn't mean it that seriously, she has absolutely no wish to go down into the bottom of the ship where the horses are. But once Father has suggested it, protest is impossible.

They go down several long stairways, they creep downwards in the half-darkness. This is a part of the ship that Evelyn has not seen before, and she feels uncomfortable. It smells strange and closed-in. The further down they go, the muggier it becomes.

"Does anyone live down here, Father?" she ventures to ask.

"Yes, most people have their cabins here. But they are very cramped! They have bunks, three or four on top of each other, and very little space in between."

Father smiles as he says that. She does not understand it, is it something to be so pleased about? She feels as if the roof is sinking closer. If only they could turn and go up again.

"Is it much further now?"

She has to shout in the racket, because the engines are noisy here. He shakes his head, smiling, surely he cannot understand what she is saying. The noise is unbearable. Father grasps and shoves open a heavy door, and then another. She feels sick, heat and carbon monoxide batter them. She can smell the animals too, but cannot see them. It is rather dark, only a few lamps are alight, high up on the wall. Now she can see a gleam of horses' bodies, there are several of them. There are Mawr and Negro, standing nearest to the wall. Father goes up to Negro and strokes his neck, the big black horse quivers. It looks very nervous. Perhaps they came up to it too suddenly?

"Well, you can see, the horses are fine," says Father.

His face is sweating; he takes out his handkerchief and mops his brow, dries his hands as well. His rings flash.

Negro's eye, which she gets a glimpse of, looks wild, in despair, Evelyn thinks. It is as if it is begging for something, almost as if it is begging for its life. She feels bad. Why does Father say they are fine, he must see that the horses are not at all fine?

"Now we can go up again," says Father, after checking their water and fodder.

"It is good to see they are doing their work."

Who is it who has to go and feed and take care of the horses down here? Are there stable-boys with them, or is it the sailors? Is it someone who sleeps in those cramped cabins at night, who has to work down here in the dark and noise during the day, in this huge vibrating hold in the bottom of the ship? Do they ever get to come up into the light and breathe in fresh air? Can they stand and feel the sea spray and look out over the sea while the sun sinks down below the horizon?

She asks only inside herself, she does not want to hear Father say they have to stay under deck the whole time, these poor devils! She does not want to know that. He might suggest they went to investigate that too. He is like that, he always wants to test her. But she absolutely does not want to come with him out on deck to find out if there are any stable-boys there, getting fresh air and swinging in the snow and wind. She would have to do that if Father suggested it.



ALUN

They are sitting in the saloon, which is nearly empty, Evelyn and Winifred. It is morning and a white snowy sky. White flakes dance in the air outside the windows. Everything is so strangely quiet. The sky and the wintry sea merge and the sea laps against the bow of the ship.

The first weeks were hard to get through. Evelyn thinks that makes sense, it is what she had heard. Now they are used to it, but the sea has not exactly spared them this time. It has roared and bellowed and thrown them out of their bunks. It has really reared up! Yet now it feels as if it has spent all its rage, as a wild horse gives in at last, and goes tamely and meekly into the stall with a gaucho on its sweating back, or with Father. Evelyn has seen him tame horses.

In a few days they will arrive. In a few days they will see London, the biggest city in the world! In a few days, the beautiful island beyond the storms will reveal itself in all its magic, for England is a large island! And perhaps Grandmother and Grandfather will be on the quay to receive them – and Aunt Evelyn?

How will she and Aunt Evelyn know who is who when they are both called Lyn, Evelyn wonders. There are bound to be mix-ups and misunderstandings! She is called after the aunt who lives in a house with a view of the English Channel. Father said his sister was a loveable person, and that was why she was given her name. Am I a loveable person? Evelyn asks herself, but does not know what to reply.

Winnie sits crouched over her drawing book. She is drawing Baby Jesus in the crib with a glowing halo round his head, and a king, who is kneeling on the floor in the stable.

“Look, Baby Jesus has a huge crown!” says Winnie.

“It isn’t a crown, Winnie, it’s called a halo,” corrects Evelyn.

“I want to have a huge halo, too. I’d like one like that for Christmas. Do you think I can get one?”

It is no use explaining to Winnie that one cannot get a halo, that it is a holy light that shines out of holy people, and it is not even certain whether it can be seen.

“I don’t know,” Evelyn replies simply.

“What will I get?”

“No idea.”

Evelyn suddenly feels worried. What will Christmas be like in England? It will not be like at home, that’s for sure. Not up at dawn on Christmas morning and dressing themselves in thin Christmas frocks while Mrs Alvarez, Carmen’s mother, pins a rose with morning dew on their chests. Not driving in solemn mood in the Bentley to the town, to the Guadalupe Cathedral – they had done that the past two

years when Winnie was no longer a baby – with the sound of bells chiming in the distance and birdsong. There are so many beautiful back-gardens in Buenos Aires and the suburbs, patios with walls around. But you can glimpse roses and other colourful plants through the gates and the tall trees that soar above the rim – flowering trees, apple and peach, and the dark ubu trees which look like giant pot plants. When they drove by, they could hear happy voices from inside, Evelyn imagined.

“Evelyn!”

It is Father. He comes walking towards them in the lounge. So early in the day! It is so long since she has seen him in anything but evening wear that she is surprised at his appearance. He is unshaven too. He looks as if he has not slept. Is something wrong?

“What is it, Father?”

“Now you have a little brother,” says Father. He comes up to them.

“A brother?” Evelyn does not understand immediately. Winnie looks completely terrified. Then Evelyn understands, of course she does!

“Has the baby arrived?”

“Yes, now you can see him.” Father seems tired, Evelyn thinks. Is he pleased? Yes, it seems to her that he feels quite proud, tossing his head, but he does not smile.

“Go and wash your hands. I’ll stay here and wait for you.”

Is there anything wrong with the baby? Perhaps Mother is not well? Evelyn daren’t ask. She knows that giving birth

can be dangerous. She has heard that from Carmen, that her aunt nearly died when her child was born. Evelyn runs off with Winnie in tow.

“Hurry up, now!”

“Yes, yes,” gasps Winnie.

“What’s happening, Lyn? Is Father angry, is he? I have washed myself, I haven’t forgotten. I’m not dirty!” Winnie shouts.

“Hush now, Winnie!”

Winnie begins to cry but Evelyn hardly registers it. She dips her sister’s hands into the ice-cold water in the bowl, cannot get the soap to lather. Dries her quickly. Runs up to the lounge again. She forgot to wash her own hands! There is no time now. Father stands and signals to them. He wants them to hurry. Oh, this heart that hammers so loudly that other people must notice it, thinks Evelyn. She looks uneasily up at Father.

When they open the door to Mother’s cabin, she feels sure that something terrible is awaiting them inside. Perhaps Mother is very ill? Perhaps their brother is not like a child ought to be? Perhaps he is different? She stands just inside the door with Winnie’s hand in her own.

Father says they should go forward a little. They see some tiny little hands waving over the edge of the small bed. It isn’t a bed! It’s a suitcase, it’s the top part of the big trunk!

“Mother?” Evelyn ventures.

But Mother does not answer.

At first Evelyn does not notice that Sister Juana is there, but there she is. She turns towards them and smiles; the wide

sleeves of her dress are folded up and fastened to her shoulders. It is so strange to see her bare arms that Evelyn stares at her for a moment.

"Your mother is sleeping," Sister Juana says cheerfully.

"Is she sleeping?"

"Yes, she is," she assures them, as if she understands that Evelyn is anxious, and that she does not think there is anything odd about it, that she thinks everything is as it should be.

"Be quiet," says Father in a low voice, "and you can see little Alun."

"Who is Alun?" whispers Winnie. "Who is it, Evelyn?"

"It's the baby. It's our baby brother." She stoops down and says it in Winnie's ear.

Winnie understands nothing. That is quite obvious.

Evelyn goes cautiously up to the suitcase and looks inside. She hardly dares look, but she must look at her brother. And there he lies. A tiny little person. He looks like a quite ordinary baby. She has seen some. She has seen Carmen's baby brother, others too. There is nothing unusual about Alun. There is nothing wrong! Tears come into her eyes. Is she going to start crying too!

"Isn't he a fine, healthy little boy?" asks Sister Juana.

Evelyn looks at her gratefully. So she did not have to ask. It is as if Sister Juana can read her thoughts, she thinks. Then she looks down at her baby brother again. Unlike little Pedro he has flame-red hair. Unlike everyone she knows, in fact. But she has heard – where has she heard that from? –

that the lady that Father has a picture of in his study, she who hangs there gazing smilingly and secretively ahead, has flame-red hair. She raises her hand to stroke her baby brother's head.

"Don't touch the boy!" says Father. "Now we'll go, so both of them can rest."

"May I peep into the suitcase, Father?" It is Winnie whispering. Winnie has not been able to see Alun. When Father opens the door and pushes them carefully but firmly out, Winnie ducks under his arm, in again, and runs towards the lid of the trunk.

"Ooh, look!" she shouts shrilly, so that Mother turns in her bed and moans. Sister Juana takes hold of Winnie, but she wriggles and tears herself free. Father is about to grab her. He looks red in the face.

"Winifred!" His voice vibrates.

Then something strange happens. Winnie becomes completely calm. Something mild and serious comes over her. Father, all three of them, stand there unmoving and watch her. In a ray of the white, snow-pale winter sun, which shines in through the porthole onto the floor, beside where Alun is lying, Winnie kneels down.

"Look at the halo, Lyn," she points.

And truly, when she says it, it is as if the light of the sun lays a golden circle over his head.



THE REALITY

The ship has reached the mouth of the Thames. Now they are sailing on the tide up the river in the direction of Tilbury. It is hard to see how wide the river is, other ships are almost invisible until they come quite close. There is a freezing fog over the water.

They are going to leave the ship. Evelyn dreads the steep gangway down. The steamer hoots for the last time, gloomy and shrill. Evelyn cringes as she used to do when she heard the train whistle at Mechita Station. Mechita, her home, seems so impossibly distant: she feels a stab of homesickness.

For at the sight of the docks and harbours in Tilbury, Evelyn suddenly feels herself a complete stranger. That hammering heart of hers begins to pound and becomes sluggish and heavy. Is this England she sees in front of her, is this the proud capital city? Soot-coloured warehouses, rows of dirty houses and dirty narrow streets pop up in the pale grey daylight as they approach the land. She searches the crowd of people on the quay. Are Grandfather and Grandmother somewhere down there? Is Aunt Evelyn standing there? Is

she the woman in the green hat just below them perhaps?

A buzz of voices rises up. Hawsers rasp as they are fastened. There is a banging in the ship. The engine growls as it slowly stops, that huge shining kettle which has boiled until it was red-hot and driven them across the ocean, all the way here to this ice-cold day. It is not properly light, even though it is the middle of the day, even though the sun is at its highest now, and the sombre scene is so gloomy, so different from what she expected. This is the reality, thinks Evelyn, I have woken up from the dream about this to the reality.

But the clay whistle lies buried deep in her coat pocket. It lies rubbing against the lining, but only she can hear it, she is convinced of that. It does not show either; there is a little pouch in the lining at the bottom of the pocket, as if made for this luck-bringing little object. When she fetched it yesterday evening, she sat for a while looking at it. It looks like a little creature, yes, with a mouth you must bring to your own mouth to bring forth a sound, three sets of eyes you have to cover with your fingers to make different tunes. The lovely blue colour reminded her of the evening sky over Mechita, over the outhouse beside the pond, over the lemon tree where the lemons look like downy grey birds when it gets dark. The whistle is a piece of the station, it is a piece of the life they had to leave.

Evelyn swallows. Perhaps it is not so bad here? This must be a particularly cold dark day, the third Sunday in Advent, so close to the Winter Solstice?

The lady down on the quay, the one in the green hat, raises her hand and waves. But Father does not wave back, he just stands there seriously, stiffly, with his arms at his sides. He looks straight in front of him, not searching for anyone,

it seems. So that cannot be Aunt Evelyn. Evelyn realises with a jolt that she is not there, that nobody has come to meet them. So she is not surprised when Father says they are going.

"I don't think it's a good idea for you to come with me to the station," says Father firmly. "You must go straight to Brighton."

"We're going there with you," answers Mother. She does not look at him but out into the air when she says it. And she is very determined, it really appears that she is not to be moved. She stands there like a figurehead, with Alun in her arms, with her back straighter than Evelyn has ever seen. Something must have happened to Mother. It is as if reaching England at last has made her prouder. Or perhaps Alun has changed her?

It is a little over a week since he came into the world. She holds him so close to her, the quiet little fellow with the mass of red hair. Do babies usually have so much hair?

Evelyn cannot remember Mother carrying her like that. She would not have been able to recall that anyway! But she clearly remembers that it was Mrs Alvarez who took care of Winnie, and gave her milk! Exactly like the foal sucked milk from the mare, Winnie sucked from Carmen's mother's breast. Evelyn came across them once outside Carmen's house. Mrs Alvarez looked up at her and smiled. She was not embarrassed, did not try to cover herself, but gestured that Evelyn should sit down beside them. A feeling of calm emanated from them and enveloped Evelyn. She had a feeling of peace as she sat there, which mixed in memory with a good, sweet smell.

Father shrugs his shoulders, shakes his head in defeat.

"All right, come along then," is all he says.

Father gave in! Mother got what she wanted. Was that possible? Actually, Evelyn has never heard her contradict Father before. She had been silent. When Father had invited guests, when he had brought people home without warning, like that time when he had decided they should go travelling all the way to the south of the country to Tierra del Fuego – the Land of Fire – and they were to come on an expedition up a big river and sleep out in tents. Evelyn has just noticed the way Mother looked at him, and thought she saw disagreement gleam out of her eyes. But usually she casts her eyes down quickly, bows her head and bends her back. But not now!

That is why Evelyn dares to come forward as well. While she curls her hand around the whistle down in her pocket, she looks straight at Mother and asks: "Where are we all going, Mother?"

"To Victoria Station," answers Mother.

But what they are going to do there, what awaits them at the station, she dare not ask.

They take the train from Tilbury Quay to Victoria Station, into the heart of the enormous city. She gazes at the soot-black buildings, discoloured by train smoke and by smoke that rises up from tall chimneys and is beaten down by the wind. The smoke lays a diabolical coating over everything. Look at the black back gardens right next to the rails. Everything is dark and gloomy, dirty and frozen. Vegetable beds with cabbage heads that look like shining coal, is it possible to eat anything like that? Evelyn imagines she

can feel the ice in her teeth, her stomach churns. Rows of stalks with the odd brown-black brussels sprout; it will not be long before they rot back into the soil. Then the train rises higher or the slope disappears. They go into a narrow viaduct between factory walls.

Evelyn knows there is a war, not exactly here, but in France, not very far away. It makes people unhappy. She looks at the closed expressions of the other passengers on the train. The war suddenly gives everything a sorrowful imprint. But that it should be so horrible, so ugly everywhere, so heartlessly ugly, thinks Evelyn. What happened to the air as clear as glass, the hillsides green in winter, and the dazzling white snow, which Mother had described so vividly? Is this the magic island?



VICTORIA STATION

In the large hall with iron arches under a sooty glass roof which the light can hardly penetrate, in the half-darkness over the platforms, and in the smoke from trains which stand murmuring, there is teeming life, but at the same time it is noticeably quiet. So many people gathered together, but one can hardly hear them. It looks as if people are talking to each other, but muffled, they are standing very close together. Many are simply standing looking at each other. They move their lips, but no sound comes out.

Father and Mother walk in front, Mother with Alun in her arms. They too are quiet. They walk rather solemnly, like the nuns in church. They march forwards, thinks Evelyn. They pick their way slowly through the crowd. She walks just behind her parents, leading Winnie. What are they doing here? Does the train to Brighton go from here?

Now Evelyn notices that Father is carrying a suitcase, but where is all the rest of their luggage? Where are the horses?

A horse neighs just beside them, but it is neither Mawr nor Negro. This one is wearing blinkers and a saddlecloth

with shining fastenings. Winnie nearly walks straight into the legs of the horse. She trips along smiling, not looking where she is going.

"Look up, Winnie!" Evelyn whispers loudly and jerks her arm hard.

"Ow!" howls Winnie.

Now we'll be scolded, Evelyn expects, trembling. She waits for Mother and Father to turn round and tell them off, or at least look at them severely, but they do not. They must not have noticed.

"Here it is. This is the carriage," says Father then.

He is talking to Mother. I had better help, thinks Evelyn, and lifts Winnie up onto the step, pushes her ahead and is about to clamber up herself.

"No, Lyn dear, you are not going in here!"

Who is going in here, then?

"This is not your train," Father says. "I am going to travel in this one."

What is he saying? Is Father going to travel alone, without them? Is he going to abandon them here, on this unknown station, in the middle of the huge dirty city among crowds of strangers? Evelyn feels dizzy. She stands on the step, about to fall, but then he is there and catches her. He holds her in his arms as if she was a little child again.

"No," she sobs against his rough collar.

"Yes, Evelyn, now the time has come, now I must go and do my duty at the Front in France. And you must take good care of Mother and your little brother and sister until I

come back again," he whispers so only she can hear it. He puts her down carefully.

"Do you promise?"

She looks up at him and nods.

"Yes, Father."

It is as if she is growing before his eyes, as if she is stretching and becoming a head taller under his solemn gaze. She can feel the warmth streaming from the hand he puts on the shoulder of her blue coat.

Up until now she has only followed where others led. Up to now she has not understood anything, not really. Father is going to war, *that* is his duty! That is how everything adds up, that is why they have crossed the ocean. Father is joining the war against the Germans. He is going to France to fight there. The horses must be going too, they will be sent afterwards, somehow or other. Perhaps she will never see him again. Evelyn swallows, her face becomes hot and tense. She knows nothing about what awaits him in the war, but fear grows in her.

When Queen Elizabeth I, dressed in armour, rode out to inspect her troops at Tilbury Fort, she proclaimed: "I know I have the body of a weak and feeble woman, but I have the heart and stomach of a king, and of a king of England too." It was scenes like this that Evelyn connected with war, remote, something that had happened long ago. But they must have died. The Queen sent thousands of her men to their deaths.

"Goodbye, Father," she says and gives him her trembling hand.

She would have liked to say more, some words he could have taken with him on his way, but in his presence she nearly always becomes dumb, regardless. She cannot remember him ever having said so much to her as just now.

"Goodbye," he takes her hand in his, holds it for a little while.

Then he pats Winnie on the head. He looks enquiringly at Mother. "Goodbye, Myrna," he says. He is rather gruff, Evelyn thinks. Mother leans towards him and raises her face to his. Alun is squeezed between them and begins to cry. Mother is shaking with sobs, but then Father tears himself free.

"Oh, Peter," Evelyn hears her sob, but so softly that neither he nor anyone else could have heard it. The guard goes along the train banging doors, which echo in the enormous hall. The train emits a cloud of black smoke which envelopes all the people standing there. Evelyn can hear some of the other women on the platform crying too.

She looks at Mother's tear-drenched face, sees how bewildered and beside herself she appears. Mother staggers and is about to fall forwards with Alun in her arms. When Evelyn sees the state Mother is in, she has to hold Alun herself and feels her mother leaning heavily against her. She realises Father was right: they should not have come with him to the station. But why could he not have been a bit kinder towards Mother? After all she was only sad because he was going to war.

Aunt Evelyn, Father's dear, loveable sister, my namesake, she thinks, you must help us now!

A JOURNEY WITHOUT END?

Aunt Evelyn's house turns out to be tall and narrow, at the end of a street of several low houses in a row. It has sharp gables and a steep roof and rears up over the others, also because it is at the top of the hill. No taxi dares go up the last bit, because it is impossible to turn around and the hill ends in nothing, in sky and wheeling gulls. There is only a sheer cliff down to the Channel.

It is late in the evening before they arrive. They have to leave the suitcase on the icy cobblestones and struggle up in the direction of the house with everything else they have to carry. Evelyn hears a low moan behind her. Mother must be desperately tired.

The driver was not very helpful. He shook his head when he heard where they were going, and drove away in a hurry as soon as he had let them out. Why hadn't their aunt come to meet them at Brighton Station? She must have known they were not exactly arriving empty-handed!

Evelyn feels uneasy. Does Aunt not know when they

are arriving? They are not too early, rather they are a little late, as the train was delayed by a snowstorm which overtook them on the way out of London. It is not snowing here, but white breath puffs out of their mouths and an icy cold wind meets them at the top of the hill. There is a smell of the sea, a smell they have become used to, but all the same there is something foreboding about it now, as if they are still travelling, as if they are never going to arrive!

The house seems so dark and silent. It is Evelyn who creeps up the steep steps and knocks. She bangs so hard at the knocker with the gaping lion's mouth that her arm trembles, but there is no reply, nobody comes and opens the door to them.

What has happened? She begins sweating although it is so cold. Has Father forgotten to tell his family? What are they going to do if there is nowhere for them to stay?

For a moment Evelyn finds comfort in the thought of Mary and Joseph in Bethlehem. They found somewhere to stay in the end. They too had travelled a long way and it was even worse for them because Mary was expecting a baby. There is hope for all travellers even when it seems most desperate, if they can only manage to keep their spirits up!

Evelyn knocks once more. Perhaps Aunt is fast asleep? She had not thought of that. Of course she has become so tired of waiting that she has simply fallen asleep. Evelyn bangs even harder, so she thinks it must echo through the rooms inside.

But the house is just as resoundingly silent. With the tower silhouetted against the dark winter sky and the high fences, it looks more like a fort than a home.

What should she do? Not only does Aunt's house and neighbourhood look quite dead, but Mother has sat down on the lowest step next to Winnie and says nothing at all. Evelyn staggers under the weight of this quietness. Up to now she has hurried to arrive, she has walked with her head up, but a painful tiredness is about to overtake her. She too wants to sink down beside the others and simply sleep.

But she cannot do that. It is dangerous! She remembers what Father told them about the explorers in the Andes Mountains, who perished because they lay down to sleep with too few clothes on in the cold.

"Are you asleep, Mother?"

"No," answers Mother quietly.

Evelyn shakes Winnie, pulls her by the arm.

"We can't sit here," says Evelyn. "We have to go for a walk." Her voice quavers.

"Yes."

She takes Alun from her mother and rocks him a little too, lays her cheek against his forehead and rubs tenderly. He wakes up and begins to cry.

"Hush, hush," she soothes him.

She holds him carefully, tests every step. It is slippery and she must not fall. They have to leave the suitcase where it is. They walk towards the town. Mother is extraordinarily stiff and bent as she trails along after Evelyn, puffing and panting. What is happening to her, Evelyn wonders, and a strange thought comes to her: it is she who is mother now and must take care of Mother and the other children!

The cold wintry streets are quiet, glittering and twinkling in the reflected gaslight and here and there a lit-up room. Some have Christmas lights in the windows. The smell of food seeps from a big house into the cold. Suddenly Evelyn feels how unbelievably hungry she is, so hungry that she almost feels sick from the pain. Oh, to be one of the ones indoors! The ones who sat at a long table among family and friends, dangling their legs, and were served one dish after another, on shiny plates, indoors in the light, indoors in the warmth.

She must not think about that, it will only make her miserable. Everything might have been so different! She must take one step at a time. The most important thing now is to keep moving, to stay warm. As she walks, she peeps down at Alun; he has become quiet, but he is not sleeping, as there is a gleam in his dark eyes.

"I can't carry on any further." It is Mother's weak voice. She is falling behind. We must turn back, we must fetch the suitcase anyway, Evelyn thinks. As long as it is still there.

The suitcase sits at the foot of the hill, but someone has obviously discovered it. A car has stopped beside it. They can hear someone talking. The car drives off and Evelyn makes out the figure of a woman moving up in the direction of her aunt's house. Is it Aunt? Should she shout? Evelyn takes a grip on herself.

"Mrs Evelyn Angell!" she shouts.

It is clear she does not hear her. Evelyn jogs, gasping, she notices, and calls again. Now the woman hears her and turns round.

"Yes?" replies Aunt.

Evelyn goes warily nearer.

"Well," says the aunt, "am I perhaps talking to Evelyn?"

"Yes."

"I had a suspicion when I saw the luggage," says Aunt, "and there is the rest of the party, I see. Come along inside, this is no night to be out in, no night for angels!" she jokes.

Mother still says nothing, barely a greeting.

Where have you been? Evelyn wants to ask her aunt, but of course she does not.

"Let me take the dear little boy," says Aunt, nearly tearing Alun out of Evelyn's arms.

"I didn't expect you until later," she went on.

Later, when would that have been? Evelyn stamps up the steps, but nobody can hear that is what she is doing.

"I couldn't resist the temptation, I simply had to go to a little Christmas party," Aunt adds.

Evelyn feels the tears come, they burst out. But why is she crying now, then, when they have been let into the house, when they have arrived at last?



IN THE HOUSE BY THE ENGLISH CHANNEL

It is cold outside, it is cold inside too. The winter wind that blows over the Channel takes hold of the house and seeps in through cracks under window frames and doors. Evelyn is permanently cold. It is only warm near the fireplaces, but the peat that burns in them does not manage to heat the big house.

In the evening they sit close to the fire to warm their hands and feet. The sitting room furniture is so cold that the velvet upholstery feels almost wet. It is hardly possible to stay indoors in the daytime: only in the kitchen where the stove retains a little heat from cooking, and in Mother's and Alun's room, where they have to have hot water for the milk and the nursery, is it liveable.

"For God's sake, keep the doors shut!" shouts Aunt, irritated. But Winnie forgets. Evelyn goes after her and tries to watch out for her, but before she knows it, Aunt is there and pinches Winnie for forgetting.

"Wretched little girl, can't you learn!"

Aunt is cross, she clamps Winnie's hand onto the door handle and pushes the door closed roughly. "Like this!"

Evelyn knocks on Mother's door. She wants to tell her how strict Aunt Evelyn is towards Winnie. She feels Mother ought to speak to her, because Winnie becomes so upset.

"Mother?" Evelyn waits.

"Are you there, Mother?"

Evelyn knows she is there, she has hardly left the room since she came here. She pushes the door open with care. Mother is standing gazing out of the window, out over the Channel. She does not notice Evelyn.

"Mother?"

"Yes, now what is it?"

She clearly does not like to be disturbed. She turns towards Evelyn and gazes at her with a distant look. How pale she is! She has enough troubles, Evelyn thinks, and does not mention her errand.

"Are you feeling ill, Mother?"

No reply. Evelyn becomes uneasy.

"Is Alun all right, then?"

Evelyn bends over the basket where her brother is lying, right by the fire. She steals a little of the heat there as well, while she peeps at the sleeping pink face under the downy red hair. There is a sour whiff about him, but mostly sweet.

"Lyn, don't touch him, don't disturb him now!"

Evelyn quickly moves away, feels a blush rising. Her chest contracts. Is there something wrong with him? No, he seems to be quiet and at peace. It is Mother there's something wrong with, she realises, she looks ill. But she feels that Mother does not want her there, so she does not ask again. Instead

she asks:

"May Winnie and I go out, Mother?"

"Yes, go out, definitely do that," she replies.

Evelyn tries to interpret the tone of her voice. Is Mother resigned, relieved or is she grieving? Why should she be grieving? Has anything happened to Father that they are keeping concealed from Evelyn? No, they had a fine greeting from him yesterday, the sort of card that can be spread out into a three-dimensional tableau, which showed the stable in Bethlehem. "*Bon Noel*" was written in golden letters on a sky-blue background. "I am fine. I look forward to my first French Christmas, even though I miss you all terribly," was written in Father's bold, elegant handwriting. "I send you all my warmest wishes for the holidays."

So where does that strange hollow voice of Mother's come from?

It is Winnie who has Joseph's whistle in her pocket now. When it looked as if there would not be any presents for Christmas, apart from something which had come from Grandmother, Evelyn made up her mind. She had no money to buy anything. In the light of the stars which shone into their room very early on Christmas morning, she solemnly presented Winnie with the little beetle whistle.

"Oh, thank you, thank you, thank you!" shouted Winnie, overjoyed, dancing round in bare feet on the cold floor.

"How cunning you were," she winked at Evelyn.

They slept in the same bed afterwards, Winnie's head under her chin. They slept until they woke up by themselves.

The house was completely, almost oppressively, quiet; only a few distant church bells were ringing.

Then they went down to the ground floor in their dressing-gowns, as they used to at home when it was Christmas, and carefully pushed the sitting room door open. But where was Christmas? No decorations, no tree to be seen. Nothing was different from the day before.

Aunt certainly had not deceived them when she asserted that they should not expect much. At the sight of the cold, dark sitting room, Evelyn felt tears stinging, but still she had to smile when she heard Winnie blow some notes on the whistle.

There was obviously no question of going to church, Aunt was not going there. Grandmother and Grandfather could not come either. The journey from Cardiff was too strenuous for them, specially in winter. Grandmother had knitted light-green gloves for her little girls. They would be able to come in the spring, when the weather was milder and the dreadful war was over! Then of course they would see their dear Peter.

But we must wash ourselves and dress up for Christmas, Evelyn thinks. And she must help Winnie. There is no help to be had from anyone today, not even from Aunt Evelyn's housekeeper, Mary, who otherwise does all the practical work. She is friendly to the girls. Now and then she helps Evelyn with Winnie.

Mary is at home, taking care of her blind mother further down in Channel Street. Evelyn has had a glimpse of the blind mother when she went past, she stood gazing out of the window like Mother, almost in the same way.

Evelyn drags a stool over to the stove in the kitchen and makes Winnie climb onto it. She puts a bowl of lukewarm water on the stove and takes off Winnie's vest and drawers. It is so strangely quiet in the house. Perhaps Aunt will turn up now, she will be wanting her morning tea, thinks Evelyn, and she will not like to see her taking charge. Nor that Winnie is standing there naked either!

She washes Winnie's face with a cloth she finds in the linen cupboard. Or perhaps it is a table napkin she has helped herself to? She rubs Winnie's thin shoulders and round tummy with rough movements, too hard. But Winnie does not complain.

The hair is the most difficult. It is so troublesome to get it all into the bowl and specially to get it rinsed. Evelyn has to add ice-cold water from the pump. It runs down over Winnie's body so she shudders and her teeth chatter, and it splashes and makes a huge puddle on the floor. Oh dear! Is anyone coming?

Winnie stands rubbing the whistle while the water runs. It shines pink and blue.

"You must hide the whistle, Winnie! Be quick!"

"Yes, I will hide it." Winnie is almost crying.

But why am I making such a fuss, actually? Evelyn takes a grip on herself. Aunt would not even notice the whistle. And what if she scolded a bit? And if Mother came in, perhaps she would have chosen to ignore them? She barely glances in their direction any more.

She has enough to do with Alun. She potters about and takes care of him all day long. Or does she? Does she not rather spend most of her time standing and gazing towards

France, as if, in a lucky moment when the weather was clear, she could see what was happening on the other side of the Channel. But that is quite impossible!

Nobody comes in. Only the winter wind that shakes the house, and far away the church bells ring again. Evelyn strokes Winnie's hair and puts on her dress with gentle hands.

Actually she is no longer afraid of Mother getting angry. Now she is more afraid of what is going to become of her. Her suffering face haunts Evelyn, it almost overshadows her anxiety about Father in the terrible war. Poor Mother! And if she is ill, then what will happen to them? Evelyn dares not complete that thought.

They have to manage by themselves today as on other days, even if it is Christmas Day. They go out alone. They go out again; the hinges of the big door shriek again when they close it behind them. Evelyn wants to turn and run up again to Mother's room, take hold of her and shake her, tell her what day it is and now she really must wake up!

Then they hear a drone high up in the winter sky and look up. It is something small and brown which flies bellowing far up in the greyness. Evelyn stands amazed, staring.

Winnie tugs at her arm.

"What is it, Lyn, what sort of bird is it?"

But it is no seagull, it is not any kind of bird at all.

"It isn't a bird," she says, but does not want to explain, because she can see that it is an aeroplane, such as she has heard of. And it is heading over the Channel towards the war in France.

SIGN

When Evelyn gets up in the morning and puts her feet on the cold floor, she thinks she can still feel that it is rocking. The movement of the ship, during those weeks they were on board, still remains in her body. For a while, before she is fully awake, it feels as if she is on the steamer, as if the house in Channel Street is the ship, where she is still looking forward to arriving. But then she sees the trees waving in the half-darkness outside, and hears murmurings in pipes and the clatter of cups and pots and cutlery down in the kitchen. Mary has already arrived; she comes early in the morning before they are awake. Ever since Boxing Day, she has been in charge of everything.

Every morning, before Aunt goes to the office, she lights a cigar and puts it in the ashtray. She is a widow and has to stretch her meagre pension, so she says. But she has worked since she was thirteen, she said that too. A thin grey-blue smoke rises in spirals towards the ceiling, where it floats like a summer cloud. "I simply love the smell of cigars," she says. It reminds her of her husband, because it was he who smoked.

Her husband was a captain, but in his last years he

worked in the office of the shipping company where Aunt works now. He must have been a splendid man, before he became ill with TB. "We were very happy", Aunt often says, as though she has to remind herself. TB is a terrible illness, he wasted slowly away and was in great pain. When she comes home at teatime, late in the afternoon, the cigar has long since burnt out, but there is a slight scent in the upholstery and the heavy curtains, perhaps that is what she loves?

Evelyn does not like the cigar; the smell is not unpleasant but it makes her uneasy. Exactly as it made her uneasy at Señor Fernandes' house in Buenos Aires. When she peeps into the sitting room at Aunt Evelyn's house and sees the cigar lying there smoking, she feels that it is sending a signal which she cannot interpret.

After drinking milky tea and eating slices of bread with sugar on, Evelyn and Winnie go out. Mary shoos them out of the door, as she has to tidy up and clean, bake and cook before Aunt returns. Evelyn and Winnie go on errands. They are sent all over the place, often quite far away, right down to the harbour to buy fish. They have already been there several times. They are sent out for coal or peat, which they have to carry in heavy square buckets, so big that they bump on the ground. Always such cold fingers! The fisherman slits open the belly and takes out the innards, nevertheless the fish flops in the paper for a long time afterwards, so Evelyn has to hold it tightly in stiff fingers all the long way home.

This day it is dark before they return, because they take the way along Parsonage Close by the school. They go past just as the pupils finish lessons and come out. They have passed this way before and peeped at them secretly. Evelyn

wishes she could start going there. She will ask her aunt if she may be allowed to, but first she wants to have a closer look at them. All the girls have the same coats and hats; they do not walk hand in hand, but they gesticulate or put their hands over their mouths and whisper to each other. Evelyn and Winnie stand half-hidden behind the gatepost, watching.

"Do you know them, Lyn, Lyyyn, do you?"

Evelyn does not answer.

"Hush, Winnie, be quiet!" she hisses softly.

"What are they called, Lyyyn?"

"Can't you keep quiet!" Evelyn raises her voice without thinking.

She cannot bear to hear her sister's pestering. Why does she have to tag along with her all the time? That does it. The girls notice them.

"Yuck, look at that disgusting fish that peculiar girl's got there!" one of them yells.

Why is she peculiar? Evelyn looks down at herself. She has a blue coat too, a little short, to be sure, but nearly the same as theirs. Is it so obvious that she is different, that she is not from here, perhaps?

She starts running, away from the staring, giggling girls, and away from Winnie. She hears the evening sirens from the factories in the town, it is already late, so late that they will not reach home with the fish before Aunt Evelyn returns, but she is not bothered about that, she just wants to get away.

She definitely does not want to go back to Aunt's house at all, if only she did not have to! She does not want to skulk about in those cold rooms. They are not to disturb Mother

and Alun, and when Aunt is at home they have to be quiet. They have to whisper to each other. Is she as kind as Father said she was? Is Aunt Evelyn loveable at all? She does not want us there, and it would be better for us to go away, Evelyn realises. Oh, Father, what am I to do?

Suddenly she thinks she can hear her father's voice. She slows down, stops and looks up, searches the sky as if the voice comes from above.

"You must dry your tears, Evelyn. You must go and look for Winnie, because she can't find the way by herself. You must take her home with you."

"But, Father, it isn't our home!"

"No, it isn't, but there will be a way out, if only you find her."

Poor Winnie! She has nobody but Evelyn to take care of her, and she has abandoned her. Evelyn begins running again, the other way, back in the direction of the school. Oh, if only Winnie is standing there, if only she has not lost her!

Evelyn cannot see her anywhere, not outside the school gate where they were standing, nor anywhere in the street. Where has Winnie gone? She runs to the bakery, where she knows Winnie likes to peep in at the window. She is not standing there either. Besides, it is nearly dark now, dark in the bakery. Where can she be? She calls her, runs back the same way. Perhaps she has gone down to the harbour again!

"No, Winnie!" she shouts out.

She throws away the stupid fish, soggy newspaper and all, right there in the street. At that moment a truck comes and drives over it. It lies there like a slimy clot of blood on

the cobbles. She is scared now, feels fear as a scorching heat. So long as nothing has happened to her little sister! She is too small to take care of herself. Father is right: it is only she, Evelyn, who can take care of her. But where should she search?

She goes once again to Parsonage Close, into the space between the school and the church. There she sets eyes upon Winnie. It must be her. She sees a dark shadow, almost a bundle. Winnie has curled up on a bench and fallen asleep. There she lies, exactly as she did when her father left her outside the theatre in Buenos Aires.

At first Evelyn picks her up, thinking she will carry her home like a fish!

"Oh, my darling Winnie," she whispers, "I found you!"

She wants to hold her close and never let her go again. But Winnie feels so cold that Evelyn dares not let her sleep any longer. She puts her down carefully. Winnie buckles and sinks down, but she moans, and Evelyn pulls her up on her feet again, pushes and supports her to Channel Street, all the way up to the house on the top of the hill.

Nobody comes running when Evelyn pushes open the front door and lets the shivering Winnie in, not even to scold. There is nobody in the kitchen. The house is dark. There is something going on. When she has pulled herself together, she hears angry voices upstairs, coming from Mother's room. Alun begins to cry. She can hear resounding, determined footsteps which bang on the floor above their heads. Winnie is almost bluish in the face. Aunt Evelyn comes rushing down the stairs and sees them, but she looks through them and sweeps past. She opens the kitchen door and slams it shut behind her.

LYNETTE

"You must be sensible, Lynette," says her aunt.

She turns to Evelyn. She calls her 'Lynette'. They cannot go about with the same name, she does not like that. Therefore she has rechristened her. It means 'little Lyn', it sounds French. Is she little? No, but she is smaller than Aunt Evelyn, that is a fact. And she is different, she wants to make her distinction. And she does not want to have the same name as hers, not any more.

She glances over at Aunt Evelyn's closed face, it seems to her that it is covered by a hard mask. From now on she too would rather be called Lynette. She makes up her mind, she has made it up already.

The wind from the sea makes the crooked trees sway. The branches are waving goodbye. There is a whiff of spring in the air. It has been settled that they are to leave this place. It came as no surprise; Evelyn was expecting it. No, *Lynette* is her name now, she just has to get used to the name!

"Myrna, your mother, can't just stay in the house and do nothing, it is not good for her," says Aunt Evelyn, speaking

so fast that she nearly trips over her words.

"It is time for Myrna to go out to work. It is not good for anyone not to be busy, in times like these. One must not have too much time to think!"

There is no discussion. Aunt has talked to a friend of hers, Angela, in Nottingham, who knows a Mrs Nuttall, a decent person, who is interested in having the two little girls come to stay with her.

"Yes, now I think you will be pleased, Lynette!" Aunt looks at her enquiringly.

"It wasn't easy to get this arranged, believe me, but it all worked out in the end. And I am convinced this is best for all of us."

Even though Aunt explained it like this, it was not clear to Lynette what was going to happen, not really. And in the following days, Aunt was so cheerful and amenable and so eager to help them to get ready that Lynette could not bring herself to ask more about these plans.

"Lynette, come, I want to show you something," calls Aunt Evelyn in high spirits.

Two lovely velvet coats, dark brown, are draped across the sofa in the sitting room, and two deep red cotton dresses with velvet sashes. One pair of red shoes and one pair of brown shoes stand on the floor, proper boots with laces. How has Aunt got hold of such things? It is war and a time of scarcity. Perhaps this means that the war is nearly over?

But it is a long time since anyone has mentioned the word peace. A war can last terribly long. Lynette has heard the gauchos talking about the War of Independence in

Argentina, which had lasted over thirty years!

"Here, you can see, I have my contacts!" Aunt Evelyn laughs.

"It is good English quality which will be nice for you to have in Nottingham when you start school there. I don't want Mrs Nuttall to think you are two pauper children coming to stay! Now, what do you say to this, then?" says Aunt Evelyn, almost triumphantly.

Lynette stammers out a thank you and feels her body begin to tremble. Now she realises for the first time, now the seriousness of it hits her. She and Winnie are going to be sent away to a town far north of London, alone. They are going to live with a completely unknown woman. Who is Mrs Nuttall, what is she like? How long are they going to be there? Does Father know about it? Has he been involved in the decision? Why can they not be with Mother where she is going? No, she has enough with Alun probably. What if anything should happen to herself, something bad? Then how would Winnie manage all by herself among strangers?

For Winnie's sake, in any case, she must ask whether they can stay with their aunt, even if Mother goes. That would be the best, after all. Only until Father comes back.

Aunt Evelyn is standing over by the desk, looking through some papers. Lynette can see how the shiny dress stretches tight across her back when she bends over the flap to read something lying there.

"Please, Aunt," she almost squeaks it out, "can't Winnie and I be allowed to stay here a little longer? We won't be any trouble."

Suddenly Aunt's friendliness is wiped out. She turns on her heel and glares furiously at Lynette. And she strikes the desk with a little rap of her hand, exactly like Father does when he is angry and hits the steering wheel.

"Ungrateful little girl!" she shouts.

But then her expression changes again. Her face becomes closed, stiff and quiet, as Lynette is used to seeing it.

"You must be sensible, Lynette, that's what I expect from a big girl like you. Besides, it is war time, we are worried, all of us, but each of us must do our best. But you must be a real scaredy-rabbit? Now you really must pull yourself together. At least for your father's sake!"

Then Lynette raises her head and meets her aunt's eyes. Obviously there's no use in pleading, no use in trying to make herself understood. Her aunt cannot be moved and everything is going to be as she has decided, but she is not right, either in what she is doing or in that Lynette is cowardly.

"I am Lynette Rhys, and I will be twelve years old in the spring. My sister Winnie, Winifred that is, and I rent a room from a woman here in the town. We aren't orphans, you know, but our mother can't have us with her in London, because she works so hard and is alone with our brother, because our father is fighting the Germans in France. Father is a cavalry officer," she wants to explain.

She must make them understand they are not to pity her and Winnie. Nobody likes pitiable people, she knows. Father has explained to her that people really despise those they pity. The children at school, the people in Nottingham,

must not think there is anything odd about her family or herself.

"Our family has lived in faraway Argentina for a long time, but we are English through and through!" she can assure them.

But if she says it like that, they will surely come to believe that they are not proper English people. It is best not to mention the time at Mechita, but let it appear that they are from Brighton instead, or from a small village in the area that nobody has heard of. Or perhaps she can make them believe she is French? That is a good idea, that might well work, now that she is called Lynette?



NOTTINGHAM

It is spring. Summer will soon be here. The first one in Nottingham. Are they really going to be here all summer? The sun warms through the dirty windows of the school building. The twenty pupils who sit in the row beside the window can feel it burning on their necks. Dust dances in sun rays shifting across the floor.

It is deadly silent, although there are sixty pupils in the classroom. The teacher stands with a pointer in his hand. It makes a whipping sound when he swings it over their heads. In the tall cupboard lies the cane, a palm stalk which he can use to beat them with.

When the school bell rings at last, Lynette cringing because it is so loud, afternoon has cast the classroom into shade. They feel very cold in the last hours and they have to strain their eyes to read in there.

Lynette does not like it there, but she would not like to leave either. Here at least she does not feel unsafe. As long as she is quiet, the teacher will not notice her, she is submerged in the crowd. The other children do not think she stands out

at all. They have not asked her any aggressive or awkward questions.

She does not want to go home to the house in Shadow Street, but marches out in time with the others nevertheless. They move like soldiers lined up, after standing up beside their desks and singing the National Anthem and saluting the Union Jack. Great Britain is a powerful nation that stretches over vast areas of the globe, the king is the supreme ruler of many peoples. Someone even said Argentina was a British colony, Lynette has heard that, but surely it is not true? The talk is only about the time when the German and Austrian-Hungarian soldiers will be pushed back out of Belgium and France, over the German border. They will never be able to advance as far as the Channel ports! Soon Great Britain and the Allies will emerge victoriously from the war, which has already gone on longer than anyone expected.

When the war is over, Father will come and take them away from Mrs Nuttall's dark house, from her endless scolding, from the air that is full of ugly words and carbon monoxide from the factories. It is the thought of Father that keeps Lynette going, that makes it bearable to walk the road back from school over the railway bridge, down to the dirty area between the ironworks and the river, where the sun can never penetrate properly.

The thought of Father makes it possible to look at Winnie, at her wretched clothes, the shamefully cut hair, the skinny arms and legs, and meet her eyes which used to be so radiant. Now her eyes are dark and serious, and seem to be sunk deeper in their sockets. Oh, Winnie! Ever since they arrived, she has been racked by a bad cough at night. So long as she does not become really ill!

When the war is over, in the autumn or the winter, and Father comes, he will take them with him home again. Away from the narrow streets, the clanging of hammers, and howling saws and sirens, from the fires in the factories, glowing red and white, and black smoke. There is soot in the smoke that spreads over the streets, the houses, the grass and trees, on all growing things, at least near the river.

Mrs Nuttall certainly did not think they were two pauper children who came to her, she thought they were two spoilt upper-class girls. She hates girls like that more than anything. Lynette does not understand it. Had their aunt not told them that Mrs Nuttall was a teacher of piano and dance? But she was going to pluck whims and superiority out of them, she said, and her eyes gleamed. She took away the new clothes they had been given by their aunt and sold them, the velvet coats and the dresses. She got a good price for them, she said. They eat so much and can be of so little help to her, it is truly only right and reasonable. Instead they were given pinafore dresses and knitted jackets. That was all right, as that was what the other children wore, but it was not enough, so they were cold all day long.

At night they curled up like two rabbits in the same bed and got warm again. But with Winnie's back against her chest, Lynette felt how the cough shook her thin body.

It was while they lay like this, in one of the first weeks they were here, that Mrs Nuttall had found a pair of scissors and cut their hair off, right off, without them noticing anything. But as soon as she woke up, Lynette felt her neck was cold, there was a strange draught. She ran her hand over her neck and realised what had happened. Mrs Nuttall had complained

about their long hair to their aunt's friend, Angela, several times.

Father will take them away, free them from Mrs Nuttall, and from their cold little hutch of a room on the second floor with the view of the river Trent. There is a layer of soot on the surface of the black river too. The last rays of the evening sun, the light from the furnaces and the floodlight beside the railway line are reflected and make the river look thick and sluggish, because it is dark down on the water, even though the evening is light elsewhere.

Lynette drags Winnie down to Shadow Street. Winnie is worn out after the long day at school. She is in the class for the youngest children, an even larger class than her own, where there is rarely peace or order. She has stopped talking, because her pronunciation is a little Spanish so they tease her as soon as she opens her mouth. But when the class is so large, nobody notices that one of the little ones does not say anything. Lynette tried to correct her speech, remove the accent. Perhaps somebody might even believe they were German! But Winnie gave up. She pressed her lips together and shook her head sorrowfully.

On the way, just by the bridge, they meet some boys from the tobacco factory. Lynette can see they are not much older than herself. Some of them are wearing only their shirts with their jackets slung over their shoulders in the spring evening, and have pushed their caps well back on their foreheads. One of them grins when he catches sight of them.

"You'd think them gals work at Golden's too! Their skin colour's same as ours!"

There is just a tiny bit left of the Argentine sun in their skins, a tinge of gold. It could actually look as if they work in those unhealthy halls. Lynette understands what he means. Winnie probably does not. If only she would ask, if only she would nag Lynette, as she used to do! But Winnie looks down at the ground when the boys go by, as quiet and timid as ever.

Lynette sets out food on the kitchen table, slices of bread and dripping, porridge and black tea. She puts a little coke in the stove. Mrs Nuttall sits in the rocking chair, she is red in the face but does not look angry. We must hurry now, thinks Lynette. They must hurry up and eat their meal and go upstairs before Mrs Nuttall's mood changes, before she begins scolding them for the least little thing. She can find something to yell about, without them understanding why, if even a crumb falls to the floor. Lynette pours her a cup of tea, trying not to tremble and show she is nervous, because that irritates Mrs Nuttall and can unleash a storm.

"Do you know, Winnie," says Lynette, whispering, "Father will come and fetch us!"

She hardly dares look at her little sister, but speaks quickly. They have taken refuge in their room, sitting together on the low bed with the worn bedclothes, though Lynette makes sure to keep them clean.

"He isn't coming now, that's not what I mean. Perhaps it will be a while, but he will come."

She notices Winnie scrutinising her, as if she is asking with her eyes when it will be.

"I don't know, but absolutely certainly.... soon," she

lies so that she believes it herself. "He'll come and take us home to Mechita. To Joseph, your friend! To Carmen and her mother, and that tiny little brother, do you remember him? He must be able to walk now. Home to our garden, Winnie, are you listening? We'll eat so many oranges that we'll get tummy-ache. The smell of warm oranges is so lovely. They have sun in the peel. The fruit tastes of sun too. Can you remember that smell and that taste?"

Lynette talks herself warm. "Close your eyes. Can you see the oranges shining? They are shining like little orange moons there in the dark."

She dares to glance over at Winnie. Her little sister is sitting on the edge of the bed with tightly squeezed eyes, smiling.



THE BOY IN THE RIVER

Lynette carries water. She has to clean the whole house. Not only the bedclothes but floors, ceilings, windows, rugs and curtains, everything has to be scrubbed and washed clean in the heat of summer. She has to do it all alone.

“I do not run a hotel!” shouts Mrs Nuttall.

She sits in the rocking chair or lies on the sofa with a glass in her hand and gives orders. Winnie is afraid of her, so she goes very close to Lynette and clings to her. She makes the work much heavier. It is hard enough for a twelve-year-old girl – her birthday came and went without a word from Mother, without anyone noticing it – it is hard enough to scrub these soot-blackened floors with brush and cloth, without having her little sister clinging to her back as well.

“Winnie, that’s enough now, sit down on that chair!”

She is almost frightened by the tone of her own voice, suddenly she feels it resembles Mrs Nuttall’s. Winnie draws away, scared. She begins to cry.

“No, Winnie, I didn’t mean it like that.” She wants to quieten her. “Come on, we’ll go out.”

“Where are you going?” shrieks Mrs Nuttall behind them.

“Out to fetch water!”

Lynette takes a bucket in one hand and Winnie in the other, bangs the door behind them with her foot. She feels braver now. Mrs Nuttall swears and scolds but she does not hit them. She is too indolent and lazy for that. But if they come too close to her, she may lunge out and slap or pull their hair, so it is best to keep a safe distance.

Down by the river, the light is so bright that it makes Winnie’s pale face seem almost transparent and the rings under her eyes look even darker. A few solitary insects are dancing idly on the surface of the water, it looks almost as if they are staggering. We have to get away from here, thinks Lynette, at least out of the town, away from the poisonous air. She has no money for the train, but perhaps it might be possible to get a lift in one of the trucks from the tobacco factory? She has seen other children being allowed to have a ride.

Lynette does not understand why they cannot stay with Mother in London, at least in the summer. She could look after Winnie and their brother while Mother was serving. Where is Alun while Mother rushes to and fro with heavy trays? Is he lying in the steam from the cooking pots in the kitchen at Bertorelli’s? That must be where Mother is working to get money for herself and Alun and to pay Mrs Nuttall. Aunt’s friend told her that. It is an Italian restaurant. I could have helped there too, Lynette thinks.

But when she looks carefully at Winnie and sees how transparent she seems, how pale her fingers are and how thin she has become, then Lynette realises that London is no place

for her either. But Mother does not know that, she does not know how Winnie is! Why does she not write to them, why does she not ask about them?

Lynette dips the bucket into the black water, the soot lies like black flower pollen on the surface. She has to push that layer aside and get the bucket down into the fairly clean water, just as she had to push the pollen from the surface of the well water at home in Mechita, or pour that layer off afterwards, but it is not easy. Lynette struggles. The wooden bucket with the thin handle becomes heavy, and she staggers for a moment, nearly falling.

Winnie is scared too, but all is well. The flakes of black soot float together again and the river becomes like a black mirror. Lynette can see the reflection of her own face, framed in that short, ugly hair. At once a memory comes to her: she comes to think of what she imagined when she looked down into the well at home, that she could see the face of the lady whose picture Father had in his study, there in the depths, that she saw her red hair swirling around her down in the well. Ugh, that was nothing but foolishness! Nevertheless, afterwards she had always connected the well with the mysterious lady.

Who was she? What was her relationship with Father, really? Lynette did not know, but she knew that Mother did not like him to have that picture in his room, that for some reason she was very unhappy about it. Mother had in fact spoken to her about how she hated that picture.

It is so hot, so hot. The river water is tepid, not fresh and earth-cool like the well water at home. Lynette straightens up and glances out over the river. It is at its widest here.

Further up, between the factories, it is narrower and flows quite rapidly.

It seems to Lynette that she can hear voices through the noise of machines. There must be some people bathing up there, just where the river widens out below the little rapids. Who would want to swim here? She can barely make out white bodies in the dim light. Who could they be? Some of the workers? They are too far away for her to see them clearly. Should she go nearer? She is curious. No, now it is the turn of the cramped sitting room, Mrs Nuttall's bedroom and their room upstairs. She has to get on with it if she is to be finished before the meal has to be served, and hurries back.

"Look here," she says to Winnie and gives her a clean cloth, "rub the windows. Can you reach?"

She pulls forward a stool for Winnie and takes away the two deep-pink withered amaryllis plants that stand on the sill. Mrs Nuttall has gone out. They can work in peace. Lynette hums '*A ro ro mi nino*' and notices that Winnie relaxes. She cannot be of much help. Lynette squeezes the sticky green soap in the water and tries to get it to lather. She rubs the ceiling with a damp cloth but needs more soap to remove the dirt. It gets smeared and ugly. Best to use the brush here too. She scrubs and scrubs until the sweat runs.

How many times Lynette goes back and forth, fetching more water, she does not know, she loses count. Winnie can wait inside when the lady is not there, so she takes two buckets at a time. In the evening the sun sinks behind the tobacco factory and the river does not shine the same, does not dazzle her.

Then she catches sight of him. The boy in the river! It is

one of the young workers, the same one who said that about their skin colour that time, whom they met on the bridge in the spring. She has seen him in passing sometimes since then, noticed him in particular. He is darker than the others, his eyes shine.

He is sitting where she thought she saw people swimming earlier in the day, on a little slagheap in the middle of the river. She is sure it is him, because she can see him quite clearly in the last rays of the sun. It is as if the golden skin sucks this light into itself. He is completely naked. A cool breeze touches her as she stands balancing the heavy buckets, but she flushes all the same. She goes red and that stupid heart of hers thumps wildly. So long as he does not turn in her direction!

But he does turn round. He shades his eyes with his hand and stares. Can he see her? Can he tell who it is standing here on this side?



THE OUTING

The wind is blowing so hard in the sunshine that there are waves on the dark river, gusts of wind skim over the surface so it ripples up like goosebumps. It is a brilliant day. Lynette and Winnie walk along the road, the thin material of their blouses and the bonnet ribbons of their Sunday-best clothes flutter around them. Their skirts keep trying to blow up over their faces. They have to hold them down.

They plod onwards. Soon they have left the river behind, crossed the bridge over the railway, passed the station. No boys either on the bridge or in the river today! No boy. For it is that one boy with the unusual shining eyes that Lynette has focused on. His picture has fixed itself inside her. She could not see his eyes at that long distance, when he sat on the rock, but remembered them clearly from before. She had half-expected to meet him on the road today, both dreading and desiring it. But really why did she think so?

He had surely gone out with his friends. Perhaps far into Sherwood Forest where there are mysterious caves and dense tree canopies to hide in? She had heard about Robin

Hood and his Merry Men, how they managed to hide away in a moment, the whole group, when anyone was after them. Or perhaps the boy goes to church?

Lynette had told Mrs Nuttall that she wanted to take Winnie with her to the Catholic church in the town. They belonged to that congregation in Buenos Aires, she explained. For some unknown reason, Mrs Nuttall had nothing against it. She who otherwise was so quick to refuse everything they asked for and kept constant watch over them. They were not allowed to talk about their mother, not even to ask Aunt's friend for news when she came to visit. They had to come straight home, were not allowed to go out and feed the ducks, as the other children often did. And they were never to take anything out of the housekeeping money for sweets.

Today Mrs Nuttall had nodded understandingly and smiled slyly at them when she shooed them out of the door; she had even helped them to find Sunday clothes.

Lynette takes Winnie's hand. They do not even go in the direction of the church but up a street with the same kind of low grey houses as in Aunt's street in Brighton, northwards. At the end the town stops abruptly. There are green fields, thick hedges and tall trees as far as the eye can see. A lush green hill rises on their left. A gleaming green landscape spreads out in front of them, and a dusty white country road winds towards the horizon.

Lynette has made up her mind that Winnie shall have a day in the countryside. That is really what she needs! To leave the dusty town behind her and breathe in fresh air! A whole day away from Mrs Nuttall's house, it would do wonders. They had no money for the train, and Lynette did not dare ask anybody for a lift, but it came to her that they could get

quite far on foot.

There was no question of a picnic, that could not be mentioned without raising suspicion, after all what would they do with it in the church? But all the same Lynette has smuggled a little bread and a bottle of ginger beer out with her.

They wander along the road, their lace-up shoes grey with road dust. Soon they cannot see Nottingham any more, only the smoke from some chimneys and the entrance to the mine in the distance. The wind has dropped so the dust does not trouble them any more, but it has become quite hot in the sun.

"Lyn, I'm tired," says Winnie suddenly.

"I'm called Lynette," corrects Lynette, but then she jumps, because Winnie has spoken!

"What did you say?" Lynette does not believe her ears, must make sure.

"My legs are tired – *mis piernas*," says Winnie faintly.

Winnie has not forgotten how to speak English nor Spanish!

"Yes, oh yes," answers Lynette eagerly, "then we'll sit down and have a little rest. We can sit down in the grass by the hedge over there."

Lynette watches her little sister among the juicy green clover and lady's mantle, there are some golden cowslips growing just by her hand. Winnie bends over the flowers and sniffs in the scent. Behind her, there are insects humming and twitterings from unseen nests. The willow hedge teems with life. Winnie curls up in the grass and blinks her eyes, they slowly close.

"Yes, you sleep," says Lynette under her breath and gazes at the peaceful face, "all you needed was a little freedom, a little air under your wings, but the air has to be clean and warm to give relief."

Father might have said something like that. Oh, Father! Lynette feels the morning sun thawing her, relaxing the stiffness in her shoulders, and a little breeze ruffling her hair. It is absolutely gorgeously beautiful, this day in Father's country. It is his, she realises, much more than it is Mother's!

Not far from where they are sitting, she can see the ruins of a house. So it is here, she thinks, the parsonage that was swept away in a flood some years ago. She has heard of the girl, a little older than herself, who miraculously survived in the house. They say it was a gipsy who saved her, up on the top floor, and they found her there just before the house collapsed.

Far away, still out of earshot, she catches sight of the speck of a car in a cloud of dust. It comes closer. It is a truck. Now she can hear the stuttering noise of the engine. It might be one of the vehicles from the tobacco factory; she feels she can recognise it, one of those she had wondered if she might hitch a lift with. Should she try to signal to it now? No, it is not worth trying. But when the truck rushes by, she stands up and looks after it.

There is so much dust that she has to turn away and cough. She barely notices that the truck stops suddenly several hundred metres away and begins to reverse. The person on the left side rolls down the window and looks out at her, raises his cap in greeting.

But what in the world! It is him, it is the boy from the

river! He looks into her eyes and smiles and nods in recognition.

"Would you two like a lift?"

He helps lift the sleeping Winnie in onto her lap, in the place between the boys in the driver's cabin, then he climbs up and bangs the rattling door shut.

"I am Tom Rynaldo and the driver is called William Rowe." He points as if that was necessary!

Lynette has to smile. She forgets herself, then hastily introduces herself.

"I am called Lynette and this is my sister Winnie – Rhys," she adds.

"You are Welsh, I heard," says Tom.

Mother's and Father's relatives are actually from Wales, but where has he heard that from? Perhaps that is what Mrs Nuttall says about them?

"Yes, we are," she hears herself reply, so quickly that she swallows the words, just a very quick little lie!

It is hot and airless.

"We can't open winders, it gets so dusty inside," Tom explains apologetically.

They bump along. You could burn yourself on the seat where the sun shines straight in. It reminds Lynette of the Bentley, but that was not a rattletrap like this!

Suddenly a rabbit hops in front of them and plunges down into the ditch at top speed. Lynette thinks she can feel how its little heart bangs wildly, like her own heart often does.

All at once she understands the expression 'scaredy-rabbit'.

"Wow, look at that, we should have grabbed it and eaten it for lunch!" shouts Tom.

Am I really a scaredy-rabbit, am I cowardly like Aunt Evelyn said, Evelyn wonders. Why didn't she take Winnie and run away from Nottingham? Why didn't she try to find Mother in London and tell her what everything is like and how anxious she is about Winnie? One day of freedom does not really make any difference either way. Nobody knew how long the war would last, because nobody said it would soon be over any more. And why didn't she even ask these boys where they were going?

As if he could read her thoughts, Tom suddenly says they have to deliver some cases at a place on the way to Lincoln, just south of Newark.

"It's not so far. We'll have a bite to eat, and then we'll go back to town again."

Lynette turns to look at him. She sees the sunburnt, downy skin by his ear and the tight print from the cap in his sweaty dark-brown hair. Could he have seen that she saw him that time? No, she really does not think he knows it was her who stood there spellbound in the light shining towards her, watching him while he bathed. Her heart beats a little slower when she has convinced herself of that, but she blushes just the same, and hardly dares move a finger for fear that he might turn and look closer at her.

At the crossroads where five roads meet outside Newark lies the warehouse where they have to deliver the goods, in the shelter of some huge copper beech trees by the river. The

dark red building and the trees are mirrored in the bright water, and they can see some feather-light summer clouds down in the depths. It is unbelievable that this is the same river as in Nottingham! Tom explains that it is the Trent that flows here too. He is the one who keeps the conversation going; William does not say much, nothing at all. He merely hauls boxes so that the sweat runs. The boss has come out onto the steps, stands leaning on the banisters, gesticulating and giving orders while biting his pipe and puffing in the clear air. Winnie has slept the whole way in the truck, but now she wakes and looks around, wide-eyed and quiet as a mouse. She has grasped Lynette's hand but does not look at all uneasy.

Lynette, also feeling calm, stands watching the boys who are carrying crates from the truck, creeps past Mr Griffiths, as the boss is called. It is almost like a painting or a living picture, she thinks, with that mysterious house and the dark forest and the brilliant sky as a backdrop – like at the cinema! Tom suddenly comes up to her, waving bread and cheese.

"Now we can sit down on the bank," he says. "Honestly, we've earned it. Come, if you can; you're so dressed up!"

Lynette is speechless but she nods her reply.

"Does that mean yes?" he asks.

She nods again, pulls herself together quickly.

They forget the time. They share all the food, drink the lukewarm ginger beer, there is only a mouthful each, so they quench their thirst with the river water. To bring one's face down to the water-mirror feels like a cool kiss. Winnie wanders off and picks flowers. Yellow irises stand shining in the shade of the forest, and there are water lilies and water

crowfoot quite close to the shore. Winnie is humming! Just as she used to when she toddled around alone in the garden at Mechita. Lynette follows her with her eyes. How big she has grown, really, and she looks much stronger, in spite of everything!

William lies dozing in the grass with the peak of his cap pulled well down over his nose, his narrow ribcage rising and falling. Tom is sitting beside her, chin in hand, gazing out at an eddy in the river where the sun dances. He has rolled up the sleeves of his collarless shirt, the sort workmen always wear, so she can see the muscles and the fine hair on his underarms. She glances carefully at him without turning her head. She can feel the grass cool and smooth under her fingers, nice to touch.

"Now your dress will get dirty," he says, breaking the silence in a soft voice.

"Yes. It wi-i-ill," she stammers.

She hears what he says, but mostly she listens to the tone of his voice.

They do not find anything else to say, yet it seems to her that she can feel his voice tickle her ear. After a while he turns towards her and asks gently:

"Why are you wearing your bonnet now, can't you take it off?"

"I don't know," she replies quietly, but with a thumping heart she pulls the bonnet ribbon so her bonnet falls back and her short dark-brown curls come into sight. He lifts his hand and strokes them. At the same moment William stirs, sits up and casts an angry scowl at them. Lynette sees him over Tom's shoulder and pulls away quickly.

Tom looks enquiringly at her, it is obvious that he misunderstands. He is on his feet in a moment and on his way to the truck. He shouts back at them that it is nearly evening. They should have gone long ago!

The evening draws in as they drive towards Nottingham. It is not the dusk that comes and lies over everything so that they can hardly see their hands in front of them, as it does in Argentina, well, in Buenos Aires at least, but a pale, shadowy darkness that glides down and blurs the expressions on their faces. Lynette is thinking about Tom, but does not know what to say. She feels sad. But she can still feel the light pressure of his gesture of affection. That was unmistakable.

She feels more and more nervous too. Gaslights are gleaming in the town in the transparent summer night. The closer they get, the more she thinks about the reception they will get from Mrs Nuttall, about the uproar she will raise because they have been away so long.

Mrs Nuttall is not exactly afraid for their safety, but if anything should happen to her and Winnie, her payments would stop!

"We'll drive into Shadow Street, it's nearly on the way," says Tom.

"No," says Lynette, "we can walk from Golden's."

She sees a glint in Winnie's eyes. So she is awake. Lynette is thinking that if they are lucky, Mrs Nuttall may have fallen asleep, but the noise of the engine would wake her if they stopped right outside.

"All right."

When they scramble out, she fumbles for his hand and tries to grasp it.

"Goodbye," she says, but it is too dark to see if he is smiling.

Mrs Nuttall is sitting in her chair in the sitting room, snoring.

"The flowers need water," chirps Winnie.

"Hush," whispers Lynette.

But Winnie has already gone to the bucket and is dipping a glass in it. Mrs Nuttall starts. The big bottle she is nursing in her lap slips down and falls on the floor with a loud thump. It seems as if she is about to get up from the chair, but after a while she sinks back again and the snoring continues so that the house rumbles.



SOLVING THE RIDDLE

Lynette is worried about the cold winter. Now she knows how pitilessly cold it can be in this northern part of the world. She is frightened about Winnie's cough, which seems to her to get a tiny bit worse every autumn day. At night Lynette is awakened, not merely by the sound but by anxiety, and she connects the unnatural light that shines in at their uncurtained window with that feeling.

She and Winnie have to set off for school at dawn. So Lynette gets up in the dark and lights the stove with stiff fingers, because the house is so cold that she can see her breath in the air. But at school it has fortunately become warm enough to sit still. It is near the gasworks, so the whole building is heated by that invisible substance. This power circulates there like a good spirit, which is soon to make the towns of the world glow with lamplight. They predict that no street will be dark in future. There will not be a single dark corner for a thief to hide in! Lynette has not yet realised that this is the gas which makes the lamp outside Mrs Nuttall's house shine so sadly at night.

One morning late in the autumn they wake to a bluish shine in the room. It is so cold that the windows have large frost-flowers on the inside. Lynette goes over and rubs the windowpane. The strange blue light turns out to be snow. She gazes out at Shadow Street, it is transformed, she thinks. How magical snow can be!

But on the way home in the afternoon it has gone; only wet, black soot dances through the air and sticks to shoes and clothes. Lynette hurries along with Winnie, speeding up past the newspaper boy, she would rather not see the terrible news pictures from France. Blind and deaf, she hurries back towards Mrs Nuttall's kitchen. It is liveable there: with light and food on the table, it can actually become quite cosy. First she has to go to the baker's, dragging Winnie after her.

Then there he is, Tom, standing right in front of them in the queue. She sees his back and the dark head, the curls bobbing at the back of his neck. She becomes dizzy. He is sure to see them when he goes out. Should she run away? But why should she run away when she has been longing so much to see him again? Not a day has gone by since the outing to the public house without her thinking about him, and that he does not want to meet her. That's it, she thinks, that's why she ought to run away, but she keeps on standing there. It is steamy in the bakery, perhaps it will make her invisible?

She shrinks when he says hello.

"How's it going?" he asks politely.

"Fine, thank you," she replies.

It is not the least bit fine! Another lie. She feels him

looking searchingly at her. Does he know? She blushes and turns her face away.

"Goodbye, then."

As quickly as he had appeared, he was gone. Will it be as long until they meet again? It is strange that they can live only a few streets away from each other, walk nearly the same route every day, and not run into each other. She knows where his house is. She has secretly gone and almost touched his green front door, wanted to knock, but lacked the courage. She stood for a while looking at the white curtains and the large pink geraniums which concealed most of what must be the Rynaldo family's sitting room, before she hurried away.

She stops outside Mrs Nuttall's house, but then she changes her mind, turns and pulls Winnie with her in the direction of Bartford Close. She cannot see him, it is beginning to get dark, but he must be somewhere just in front of them.

He is not. Someone comes up beside her from behind, and it is him. Does he not see it is her, is he thinking of walking straight on by? Without thinking she shouts, shouts his name out so she feels that it resounds between the rows of houses and everyone must hear it, all the children playing outside or on their way home. Their mothers who are standing indoors by the kitchen counters brewing tea look out, and the fathers who are finishing or beginning shifts at the factory look up. Dogs in every ally, horses pulling barges on the canal, birds in the sky, all must hear her shout.

Tom does, at any rate! He turns and comes back.

"Is anything the matter?"

"No, nothing," she replies, shocked at herself.

"Please, Lynette, tell me what it is. Is there anything you would like me to do?"

That it should be so difficult to get out the words that are already on the tip of her tongue! She looks at him, confused, tidies her hair, feels whether her beret is on straight. But then he has to smile at her confusion, he smiles at her, and she has never seen a more beautiful smile. It is as if the sun has risen again.



THE RENDEZVOUS

Mrs Nuttall's unnaturally blonde hair sticks to her forehead at the least movement. She is heavy and short of breath. It is unthinkable that she is a dance teacher, that she is a dancer herself. Shouldn't a dancer be light and graceful? In Buenos Aires Lynette had seen dancers so springy that it looked as if they hardly touched the ground.

There is nothing graceful about Mrs Nuttall. She is not particularly cheerful usually, but now she forces herself to be so. A little boy is sitting at that lop-sided piano of hers, the son of the school principal. The autumn sun lights up the dusty windows, but is not able to penetrate properly inside. It is only a day or so after they are cleaned before the coal dust covers the panes again.

Even though it is shadowy and cold in the sitting room, the boy is sweating; his hands slip on the piano keys as he keeps on making mistakes.

"Lynette, fetch a cloth, please!" Mrs Nuttall calls with artificial pleasantry.

This is not going to work out, thinks Lynette, half-

concerned, half-malicious. She has seen it several times over the nearly two years they have lived here. The children begin at Mrs Nuttall's but it is not long before they beg to stop. Soon enough little Edward will disappear as well. Lynette passes him the cloth so he can dry his thin fingers. He looks at her with a strange expressionless stare, but she tries to send him an encouraging smile all the same.

"Off you go now, don't disturb us any more!"

Mrs Nuttall raises her voice. Lynette quickly withdraws, closing the door a little too hard behind her. It is no use explaining anything or saying anything in one's own defence here, so she does not have a bad conscience either about deceiving Mrs Nuttall.

"Try again!" she hears Mrs Nuttall shout in there so it echoes inside the piano. "One and two and three and four!"

She will have several pupils this evening. Then they will get money for housekeeping. But if I know her, she'll spend most of it on wine! But not tonight anyway, Lynette calculates. She plans to set aside a few shillings before Mrs Nuttall gets that far.

Lynette hurries up to the room, to Winnie, who is sitting playing her little whistle carefully, and whispers that she must be good and put herself to bed, because she is going out.

"Are you going out again now, Lyn?"

Winnie follows her with her eyes as she wriggles out of her skirt and blouse and that eternal apron and puts on the new dark blue dress. It is Mother who has sent it as a present for her thirteenth birthday, very late, it is true, but at least she remembered it, unlike the year before!

Lynette did not know whether she was truly pleased. She had longed to hear from her Mother. She was sad when she read the enclosed letter.

Lyn, my dear girl,

I have not heard anything from you, but Angela has said you are well. I want to send you greetings and a present for your birthday. It was not easy to get hold of the dress in times like these, but Mrs Bertorelli had it sent from Italy. Spring has come to London now, and even though there's a war on, we are very busy at the restaurant. Mrs Bertorelli helps me with Alun. We have almost become a part of their family, so you must not worry about us.

Happy Birthday!

With love, Mother

She folds up the piece of paper with the familiar, yet oddly strange handwriting and pushes it into the back of a drawer in the grey chest-of-drawers. Was Mother all mixed up with the times? What did she mean that she had not heard anything from them? That stung Lynette. She had written so many letters, at least to begin with. It was Mother who did not let them hear from her. Surely she did not have as easy a time as she claimed. No doubt she was beside herself with anxiety about Father, as Lynette herself was. But Lynette did not think about him continuously any more, she did not long for her parents as before. There was something else that occupied her time and her thoughts. She had to admit that.

"Keep on playing, I won't be long."

She is already on her way down the stairs, dashing away to avoid more questions from Winnie, and does not want her to fuss about coming too! Lynette feels a touch of guilty conscience, but makes a silent prayer that Winnie will become quiet soon, that Mrs Nuttall will not find any reason to come and investigate. Then she would discover the vanishing trick.

She is suddenly struck by another thought. Actually, why is Mrs Nuttall called 'Mrs'? Lynette has never heard that there was ever a man in the house. She has never made any mention of it.

Lynette hurries away, through Shadow Street, up Mercury over the bridge, then she slackens her speed when she catches sight of Tom. That impossible heart of hers jumps as high as the sky. She has to stop and catch her breath. He turns round and sees her. Then she cannot wait, but runs forward to where he is standing and holds out both her hands. At the same moment the sun dips behind the furnace in the distance.

They stroll along the street while the darkness gathers. Nothing is as dark as the darkness of October, no frost or snow to give light, and the river, where the black smoke sweeps over the surface, extinguishes all light. There is an ice-cold gust from the river. They have come here many times before on their secret evening walks, sheltered by the dark, but it has not always managed to conceal them as well as now.

"I was afraid you would not come," he says quietly.

"Yes," she answers.

She feels strangely peaceful when walking beside him, but full of excitement as well. She is sure that her eyes are revealingly bright and is glad of the dark. That grown boy!

He is so much older than her. What kind of company can he really find in her? But she has not asked him about it, not about anything to do with them. She has listened to him, to his memories and his dreams, and told things herself she could not share with anyone else here.

They have talked and talked, it has been so easy! Now and then she plays with the idea, the dream of touching the mouth that the words pour out of, those soft, slightly lopsided lips of his, which she knows can smile so radiantly beautifully. But that naked body, which she saw a glimpse of in the river last year, that she does not dare imagine once!

He has told her about his grandmother in Italy, about what he remembers from the time they were there, because that was already long ago. He was born in England and spent his first years here, but when his father got pain in his lungs from working in the mine, he went back to his homeland to try to find work there. Times were better than when they had left, but it was still not easy, because the political situation was difficult. Tom remembered that when they visited his uncle in the huge jail in Milan, there was an eerie silence inside the walls. He would never forget the clang of the gate crashing shut behind them, he said. He would never end up in jail, he declared vehemently, even if it meant that he could not always stand up and say what he believed in. Lynette thought that sounded sensible, but Tom was obviously agitated when he talked about it. Uncle Bruno had not done anything wrong, but he believed in Communism. Tom did not talk much about work at Golden's.

"Since Father went, I have to work there," he said.

"If he had lived, there would have been money for education. I would have liked to study."

But he goes to the Workers' Evening Classes. It is after he has finished there that they meet and go for walks.

Since she first admitted to him that they came from Argentina, not from Wales as he supposed, she has in her way described the huge country on the other side of the world, the mines and the railway network, which her father, the engineer, had taken part in constructing. She tried to make Tom see for himself the broad orange river, Rio Plate, on the scorched pampas plains, and the lone shadows of ombu trees where they miraculously grow in white dust. Anyone who goes under the shadow of the ombu tree is doomed, say the gauchos. Never make your camp within their reach! Had he heard of the 'ventevéo' bird? The huge one which is sulphur yellow on the underside? It shrieks in a hoarse voice "*bien-te-veo*", which means "I can see you"! She told him about bison and cattle in huge herds under the biggest sky in the world, and the gauchos and peons, the young men, who sing around the campfire when the day's work is done. And about Carmen and Carmen's mother and the servants.

Once they quarrelled. He said she should not think she was better than him! He asserted that she was boasting about her father, about their wealth, that she looked down on him, Tom. She felt paralysed by his accusations, had not understood that he could believe she felt superior. The opposite was true! But actually, what would her parents have said if they knew she was best friends and intimate with an ordinary worker? They would certainly not have looked on it with approval. But they don't know him, they cannot know how splendid he is.

She glances at him, sees his shining eyes. He has stopped in the pitch darkness under the bridge beside the textile

factory, and stands with his face half-averted. He is gazing at the river which is hardly visible; he is in the habit of falling into a trance at the sight of water.

"Lynette?"

His voice echoes under the bridge, her "yes" is also thrown back at them, so loudly that she jumps. What does he want?

"Tom?"

She can hardly see him but notices that he is coming closer. When he takes her hand, holds it in a completely new way, she guesses what is about to happen. She stands as quiet as a mouse. The sound of the gurgling water blends with strong heartbeats. His or hers? Now he has pulled her close to him. He bends down and presses his lips on hers. A tremor goes through her so she nearly loses her footing. He picks her up and lifts her in towards the curved wall. I am dancing, she thinks, now it's me floating! She feels his arms tensing under the jacket, and his lips are both soft and hard when he kisses her again. He hugs her close to him.

"I love you," he murmurs into her hair.

Is that truly how he feels! Has he too carried the same thoughts on their walks? She had thought she was too young for him. He is nearly eighteen, after all! She almost becomes afraid when she feels the strength of his grip. And at the same time, when she feels his warm breath against her numb lips, she knows he can make her float just by breathing on her. She has never experienced anything like this before, as if her own boundaries were erased and she is part of another.

"They may send me away, Lynette," he whispers.

She is aware of his body trembling.

"Away, where?"

But she understands before he manages to reply. He means the war. Nobody has escaped hearing about the bloody battles which have raged in France this autumn, about the trenches in Verdun and the shortage of soldiers. She has prepared herself for her father's possible death, but a vague intuition tells her he is not gone.

But that Tom is going to war, he who is so young! He has never revealed his feelings for her before, she has never before had him, only to lose him again. It all happens at the same time.

"You are too young!" she shouts, feeling powerlessness wash over her; and it is as if she is sinking, disappearing downwards, layer by layer, down through the time in England, through the years before. Abruptly she is in Mechita again, lying in her own bed, listening to the grasshoppers rubbing their little feet together and playing in the warm darkness outside.

She stands trembling in front of Tom, raises her hand and strokes his face, over the wet cheek and the firm jaw. She feels grown up, yes, almost old, and at the same time very young.



PARTING AGAIN

It was only a few weeks before Tom and William were called up. They too departed in the loathsome black train one gloomy winter day when the muzzles of the horses steamed, when the streets seemed completely deserted and the castle loomed like a ghost over the town although it was mid-morning. Lynette will never again think of a train as something fabulous, as she did at Mechita! It has become a greedy mechanical monster that devours all those she loves.

There was not much of a crowd on the platform at Nottingham Station, just Tom's mother and some of his brothers and sisters, William Rowe's aunt and a few others, and Lynette. She arrived at the last minute, choking, because Mrs Nuttall had barred her way and tried to pump her for information. As if she now was thoroughly fed up with her sneaking off.

"Do you think I don't notice anything?" she screamed.

Mrs Nuttall wanted to know if Lynette thought she was deaf and blind.

"I know very well that you are out flitting about at night.

But I'm telling you this: if you come home with a fat belly, you'll have to take care of yourself! I'm not taking any baby in!"

Lynette is absolutely shocked at what Mrs Nuttall says. What is she thinking? She looks speechlessly at the fat woman who is standing looking suspiciously at her; suddenly Lynette feels ashamed, not on her own account but on hers.

"Let me come past," she begs and lowers her head.

"Cheeky hussy!" shouts Mrs Nuttall.

She is red in the face and stamps her foot hard like an ox, but all at once her expression changes and she falls silent. She moves aside hesitantly and opens the door. Perhaps she feels she has gone too far, or that it is no use. Ten wild horses could not hold Lynette back.

Tom stretches out his gentle hand to Anna, his sister. She is standing wide-eyed, fighting tears, and looking so small in her dark coat, smaller than Lynette although she is two years older. She is leaning heavily on her elder brother who is standing pale and unfamiliar in his Sunday best, with a small suitcase in his left hand. Isn't he taking anything else with him? Then he will not be away for long?

"You must take care of Mother, you are the eldest now," he whispers to Anna.

Lynette is standing close by and hears what he says. Should she stand so close, she hardly knows them? What rubbish! She knows Tom, of course, but she suddenly feels an outsider.

"Oh, Tom!" Anna sobs. "*Dio e con lei e lo tiene sicoro,*" she

whispers and the tears flow.

He turns towards Lynette, puts down the suitcase and takes both her hands in his.

"Won't you visit Anna now and then, Lynette? Will you promise me?"

"I will be glad to."

Then he whispers into her hair:

"I saw it was you looking at me in the river that time...in the sun that summer evening, long ago. I don't know why I haven't told you before."

That shocks her. He has known all this time!

"I have to say it while there is still time," he whispers urgently. His voice is husky and strange.

Why is it so important for him to say it now, so long afterwards? Was he angry with her then, does he want to get even with her? Does he think she was stupid and shameless? What does he mean by 'while there is still time'? It is as if the blood drains from her body and is replaced by something sticky and chilling.

She looks straight at his neck, at the adam's apple that bobs up and down while he swallows and swallows. She looks at the large, scrubbed-clean hands, they feel stiff and glowing hot even though the raw air is biting cold. She raises her eyes to meet his strange, black, serious look.

Perhaps she hurt him that time? What is he thinking about? It dawns on her that perhaps he does not think it was stupid at all, but it is his way of telling her that he is scared they might not meet again? Lynette cannot bring herself to

ask. She cannot bring herself to lift her hand and stroke his cheek either, something the hand was about to do by itself, because it has done it so many times, stroked him gently. Everyone's eyes are on them. And now the train whistles, he has to go.

"Goodbye," he says and lets go of her.

"Goodbye."

He kisses his mother. He ruffles the hair of his little brothers and sisters, one by one, absentmindedly. Lynette feels her throat tie itself in knots when he turns on his heel and leaves.



MOTHER AND MAR

Mrs Nuttall no longer asks Lynette where she is going, does not start up and scream at her as she used to. It has become quieter in the dark house in Shadow Street. The piano pupils have stopped coming, so Mrs Nuttall has sold the piano. Lynette misses the thin melodies which the pupils now and then produced and she misses strumming on it herself, as she used to do when she had a free, unsupervised moment.

Mrs Nuttall roams restlessly around the sitting room. She comes out to them in the kitchen at tea time, more and more unkempt and breathless. Lynette has her fixed duties before and after school, but she is no longer asked to do more.

In cold seasons, she still fetches in coal for the fire in the morning twilight, but they have to be careful with coal now. It is known as Nottingham's black gold, because it is mined here, but it is not always obtainable for the inhabitants of the town. Tom had told her that the mine-owners became filthy rich in war time.

"Even if the workers are sure of a job, if it's a rush job

it's a lot more dangerous! And if there's a commodity shortage, they get a higher price."

The world is becoming colder and more dangerous all the time. How are they going to manage in the winter? The Germans have begun dropping explosives over the towns from aircraft in the sky. It has happened in Nottingham too! A zeppelin bombed the wine shop by the station. People gathered and saw that the roof had collapsed, and hundreds of bottles lay broken all over the street. Splinters of glass had scattered over a wide area. Fortunately nobody was killed, but that was only by chance.

Ships are torpedoed at sea by submarines and sink. Nobody is saved. Everyone drowns. To set out on a voyage to Argentina now is madness, but the thought has occurred to Lynette.

On the way home from school, she and Winnie go to the greengrocer's, and to the baker's to buy yesterday's dry white bread. She does as she is told, but sometimes the temptation becomes too great. Then she and Winnie gobble a fresh wheat roll in a corner. The fragrance of the bakery lingers in their hair and clothes like a blessing all the way home.

Lynette likes the bakery best. Here she thinks about the time she met Tom, imagines she can almost see him standing at the counter paying. At the greengrocer Mr Pierce's, she has to get potatoes and cabbage every single time, yet they still owe quite a lot. Lynette has to bear the brunt for Mrs Nuttall, but even though Mr Pierce is not exactly effusively cheerful, she does not feel he is unfriendly. He knows Mrs Nuttall, of course, so perhaps he understands? The little bell over the door tinkles like fragile glass. It used to make her cringe, now

the sound does not feel threatening any more. Is it so dangerous if Mr Pierce becomes irritated because she has to ask him to write the goods on the slate again? Is it really so bad if someone in the town should glance angrily at her and Winnie or shout something after them?

It does not matter all that much what people may think of them. As soon as she gets the chance, she will take her little sister and leave this dirty town. People who must think they set themselves apart are right after all, they do not belong here. Lynette tosses her head so the dark curls dance. They will not touch a hair on their heads, not Mrs Nuttall, nobody! She and Winnie are not dependent on anyone any more, not on Mother either!

It was she, Lynette, who nursed Winnie when she was ill, and got her back on her feet again. It is none other than Lynette who has made sure that she has never since gone out in too thin clothes, and that she wears a catskin on her chest when the cold weather sets in.

But she is very anxious about Tom. She wakes up suddenly in the night, as she used to do, and the reflection of the gaslight fills her with terror. Then she prays to God. She has begun doing that, praying that these attacks will not mean anything. She prays for Tom's life, for Father's; that is the only thing she has to set against the war, to turn to the good, invisible powers. Surely they must exist?

Dutifully she adds that God should protect her mother as well, and Alun of course, the brother she has only known for a few weeks. But it is the thought of Tom that pursues her. She tries to push away the pictures she has seen of

trenches, a ruined landscape and ruined bodies. But she cannot get the longing under control, the longing for his smile, the longing for his words. She hears nothing from him, but that must be quite common, and the letters she writes will probably not reach him either.

On the second Sunday in Advent Mrs Nuttall has an unexpected visitor. It is a particularly dark and damp cold day with white snowflakes whirling in the sooty air. Winnie has got her cough back, but with the catskin against her chest it is not as bad as it was, and her hair shines in the gleam from the stove.

Lynette is baking bread although it is a holy day. Nobody here bothers about that. She remembers the way Carmen's mother put the yeast into salted water at body-temperature and stirred in the flour. But that never happened on the day of rest! Then she sat dressed-up and idle on a chair or a bench outside the house and read, not only the Bible. She often read poems about a terrible dictator called Rosas, sometimes out loud to them. Mother always complained that it was impossible to get her to do anything sensible on Sundays.

When there is a knock on the door, Mrs Nuttall comes rushing through the kitchen in her black dress with her hair tied-up severely. She is obviously expecting a guest. Who could it be? Angela does not usually come until late in the day, besides she does not wait for anyone to open the door for her. And Anna, Tom's sister, would never come here, never, not unless...? But Mrs Nuttall would not have got dressed up if Anna was coming. Lynette calms herself down.

"Put away what you are doing and take off your apron! Can you clean the table?"

Mrs Nuttall is blocking the doorway so neither she nor Winnie can see who is coming. But the voice is familiar. Can it really be her? Is it Mother?

"Yes, do come in. It's not exactly a palace, but welcome, welcome!" says Mrs Nuttall, sweet as sugar.

The slight body, the narrow shoulders, are snowy. Her hat is white with snow too. It is her! Lynette notices her alarm when she looks around. She had surely not expected this, such a poverty-stricken place.

The baby begins to howl. Mother looks from Lynette to Winnie and back again, wide-eyed. Lynette wipes her fingers on the apron without thinking, and puts out her hand.

"Mother!" is all she can find to say.

"Hello, Lyn, you have nearly become a grown-up lady."

Mother smiles faintly, takes her hand and scrutinises her. Lynette smiles cautiously back, feeling almost embarrassed.

Then Mother turns away, towards Winnie. Lynette sees a shadow fall across her pale, thin face. How thin Mother has become! Except over the chest. Her blouse is wet. It must be milk.

"Winifred, how big you have grown!"

Mother tries to give Winnie a hug, but Winnie stands as stiff as a doll. She is red in the face, and her eyes become dark and fill with tears. Suddenly she darts past her mother and out of the door.

"Look here! Hold her for me a minute!"

Mother almost throws the baby into Lynette's arms and runs after Winnie.

Did she say 'her'? Lynette sits cautiously down on the bench and examines what she is holding. Of course it is not Alun! He was born two years ago, after all. He cannot be an infant any longer! But what has happened to him? And whose child is this, this little girl who has stopped crying and lies quietly in her arms?

When they are sitting at the round table in the dark little sitting room where Mrs Nuttall has polished and lit the lamp, and drink the delayed tea an hour later, Winnie sits stroking Mother's arm, not wanting to let go of her, never again! But she has to leave at once, and they have to stay here a while longer, Mother explains. At any rate until she has finished things in London and got Alun into a good school. Lynette does not understand what she is thinking of. He is only two years old!

"You should see him now, or at least hear him! I'm sure there's a good head on that boy!"

Mother enquires about how they are getting on at school, emphasising how important it is to go to school. Have they made contact with the Catholic congregation as she had suggested?

"And the children must be getting a healthy diet, yes, as far as it can be managed in times like these?"

"Oh, yes, I can assure you, Mrs Rhys!"

"Margiad, little Mar, is as good as the day is long," says

Mother, turning to Mrs Nuttall, "she is very easy to take care of, besides I am sure that Evelyn, who has grown so much, will help with the care."

Lynette looks down at the child whom she still has in her arms. Can this be Father's child? The thought flashes through her, she becomes hot and cold. How could it be? But Mar must be his. She has his golden hair and bright, distant eyes. She does not look like Mother at all. This must mean that Father has been back. She wants to ask if Mother knows how he is, but cannot get the words out. She sits wrapped up in her own thoughts, not following what is being said, so when Mother is about to go and she hears Winnie crying heart-brokenly out in the kitchen, she suddenly becomes aware. She runs after Mother with Mar.

"But Lyn, do I have to spell it out? I explained that the baby has to stay here for a little while."

"Yes, everything will be just fine," chirps Mrs Nuttall, unrecognisably reassuring.

"Yes, but," Lynette interrupts, "she is so small."

This tiny little fragile being! Suddenly it is clear to Lynette what is going to happen. It will be she who has to take care of Mar – Mrs Nuttall will only want to get the payment.

Winnie tugs at her mother's arm.

"No, Winifred, now that's enough!"

Mother shouts, pushing Winnie away quickly and firmly. Winnie nearly falls over. She is more surprised than anything else, but stares incredulously at her mother.

"Don't say a word," says Mother.

Now she turns to Lynette, looking exhausted and weak.

"I can't manage both the little ones. It's time you learnt what war means, Evelyn."

Mother is on her way out of the door and adds the last remark quickly, in a sharp voice. Lynette has to control the impulse to scream at her. She had thought that Mother would understand, that when at last she came to visit and saw their situation with her own eyes, she would take them away with her at once.

Lynette has to admit that she had been waiting for this. When they had heard nothing from Father, she had put her trust in Mother. Even though she kept telling herself that she and Winnie did not need anyone else, she knew deep in her heart that it was not true. Now how was it going to be, when she had yet another one dependent on her?



LIES

It is clear from the first minute that Mrs Nuttall does not want to have anything to do with the baby. Besides, Lynette distrusts her, she would never hand Mar over to this woman whom children are so afraid of! It is not that she is nasty, but there is something inexplicable about her that makes her terrifying. And she is so moody, like the weather in England. She suddenly clouds over, becomes dark and menacing.

In the first months Mar will not sleep at night. Lynette gets used to walking back and forth the few metres across their little floor upstairs, lulling and coaxing her by the light of the gaslamp. The light acquires a slightly more friendly gleam from this, at least when she succeeds in making Mar quiet, and she always manages that. Even if she does not always have milk to give her sister, she can comfort her: Mar is as good as her own child. In a strange way, it has turned out as Mrs Nuttall had warned her, in the end!

Lynette is very thankful to Carmen's mother. In her company she had been able to see how a baby ought to be held and nursed. How would it have gone with them if all she

knew was what she had learnt from her own mother? It's a long time since she has sat and embroidered, or so much as thought of painting in watercolours. But now and then words and fragments of sentences take shape in her. Then she writes them down in a little book she was given by her mother once, long ago.

Mar's crying stops after a while. Lynette lies down to sleep again with the little one close to her, hands around her tummy. It feels peaceful and good, at least when she manages to stop thinking about how alone they are, and when images of the war do not suddenly come before her in all their horror. But in the long run it becomes too squashed for all three to sleep in the same bed, so Lynette pulls out a drawer for Mar and puts it at the foot of the bed.

Lynette can no longer go to school, that time is over for her. But every morning she swaddles Mar in a woollen shawl and a rug, ties her onto her back and accompanies Winnie. She says goodbye firmly at the school gate, because Winnie must carry on at school, even if she would rather not and Mrs Nuttall does not care!

These are dark mornings and dark afternoons and Lynette trudges away in broken overshoes with her heavy burden, in a dark mood. When she hears Mar babbling on her back, she has to smile all the same. "I wandered lonely as a cloud..." she recites to herself, but she is certainly not alone.

She has found a friend too. Tom's pale and quiet-mannered sister Anna is both talkative and quite tough, it turns out, when she gets to know her. She looks after her little brothers and sisters and the household while Mrs Rynaldo

works overtime at the Lace Factory. It has gone over to producing military uniforms; there is no end to the orders they receive.

The boys who are sent away seem to become younger and younger, more and more disappear. So many men have gone to war now, so many regiments from the Nottingham and Derby district alone, that there is a shortage of men to do the work. All the women in the town must be out at work, all except Mrs Nuttall. They can obviously live on the money from Mother. Lynette has started wondering whether Mrs Nuttall puts aside things that are sent and were meant for them. Perhaps that is why they do not hear anything from their mother? Does it amount to Mrs Nuttall blatantly stealing parcels and letters? In the house in Shadow Street there are lies for breakfast and dinner.

Lynette must learn to be more sly herself! So when spring comes and her fourteenth birthday is just around the corner, she seizes her chance, one morning when Mrs Nuttall is out, to go carefully through her drawers. She puts Mar down on the checked bedspread and hunts feverishly through Mrs Nuttall's drawers for something from Mother. And true enough, between underclothes in the chest-of-drawers lies a pile of letters. The first she does not recognise, but the second is in Mother's handwriting! She must hurry and riffle through them, but just then she hears a sound outside and quickly shuts the drawer again. She runs out of the bedroom with Mar under her arm. Mar has dribbled on the bedspread, what will Mrs Nuttall say?

Mrs Nuttall looks sharply at Lynette when she rushes past her into the sitting room. There is no reaction, but after a little while she can hear snoring from the bedroom. Then

she forces herself to go in again. Trembling, she snatches up the pile of letters.

There are so many! Not all are Mother's, some are Lynette's own – to Mother! How did Mrs Nuttall manage to get her claws into them? They have been thoroughly fooled, both of them. Lynette feels tears threatening, but this time she is not going to cry. What's the use? She holds Mar tight, so tight that she begins to struggle, and whispers to her:

"We must make a plan, Mar. We must tell Mother what is going on. Perhaps she will come and fetch us when she understands what Mrs Nuttall is really like!"

Lynette sneaks back, puts the letters in their place again. Then she sees Mrs Nuttall's handbag, that she had taken with her, beside her on the bed. She opens it with a hammering heart, and takes all the money in the purse. Perhaps it was really meant for a birthday present? She has to have milk for Mar and seedlings and seeds for the allotment garden at any rate, and she needs enough to save up a little so she can buy train tickets one day, so they can go to Mother if she does not have an opportunity to fetch them soon. She does not know exactly when. How much should she take? Mrs Nuttall stirs, she murmurs, but only turns over towards the wall and goes on sleeping. She is so drunk that she will not be able to remember what happened to her money, thinks Lynette, and puts all the notes in her apron pocket.



HUNGER HILL

Lynette has never before understood the expression 'the spring pinch'. She has never experienced having so little to eat. She tries to find enough food for Winnie, she has gone to beg milk for Mar in the corner shop, with a crying Mar in her arms so they really would understand she needed it.

It is proper springtime at last. The weather has become warm. Anna and Lynette are sweating as they dig the ground in the little allotment the Rynaldo family were assigned on Hunger Hill, just before Tom and Anna's father died. Their bare arms look almost transparent in the bright sunlight. To her horror, Lynette sees how thin she has become. She may be taller than Anna, but she is not stronger any more. Her breasts feel like small rags of skin under the blue cloth of her blouse. They had been much bigger and rounder. It is drudgery to dig the earth with a baby on her back, on an empty stomach, yet she is in high spirits.

"Say thank you to your mother for letting me share with you," she calls to Anna.

"You've said that many times already," smiles Anna,

"you know very well we wouldn't be able to grow anything here now without you, so you have to have your share too."

Lynette is deeply thankful that it has worked out like this. Mrs Nuttall has no chance of getting a garden plot; she is not registered with any family. Recently it has been almost impossible to get hold of food. It is not just that the money does not stretch far enough, she has money to spare because she is careful, but there is nothing to buy. Mr Pierce the greengrocer just shrugs his shoulders.

"You'll have to come back tomorrow; there might be some boxes of old potatoes coming in."

They are going to plant as many potatoes as they can find space for, even where the soil is poorest, so they can utilise even that corner. Lynette feels she is almost a relative of potatoes, they too came here from South America! She stands dreaming for a while with a seed potato in her hand, the fruit of the kingdom of the Incas. Suddenly she can see Trafal before her, at the foot of the Andes mountains, the white hotel by the lake where they stayed on holiday, and children rode bareback through the sandstone gorge and hunted birds and rodents with catapults. She remembers that she missed badly at first, but in the end she got quite good at it. There was food in abundance there! They roasted what they caught themselves on an open fire.

Even if the garden is not particularly large, they can find space for a whole lot here, Lynette thinks. They are going to have turnips and swedes, carrots and viper's grass roots and beetroots. Anna has always had mangolds and spinach, so she wants them this year too, and leeks.

"It was Tom who decided, and he who was keen on growing things," Anna admits.

Lynette can imagine his strong back bent over and the muscles tensing in his bare forearms as he digs. Sweat beads on his high forehead and the dark hair curls damply. But other pictures break in, which she has seen in newspapers, specially one that looks like Tom. A young man in a dirty uniform down in a trench.

"What are you thinking about?" asks Anna, looking searchingly at her.

Lynette shakes her head. Something in Anna's look says she understands. They do not speak of him, it is as if they are afraid to mention his name, as if it would expose him to greater danger, but he is present nonetheless, he is part of what they are doing.

Last year's leeks have sprouted flower stalks, and the black stalks of brussels sprouts are still standing too – Lynette remembers the ones along the railway line when she first came to London, those that looked like coal. They weed out the rotten plants and dig over the whole patch, except where the rhubarb stands. That has already started sprouting under tough leaves. The large, pink-gold buds glint so prettily in the sun!

Lynette has to smile, even though she is so sad and her guts are screaming with hunger. They go to the pump and wash their sunburnt faces and soiled hands. Mar can drink water out of a cup now and slurps it in. Lynette has three potatoes with her and Anna a little dry bread. They flop down on the ground and consume their frugal meal as slowly as they can. They are economical like that with food. At the end, they fill their stomachs to bursting with water.

They had to walk a long way up from the town with their tools. It is high and free up here on Hunger Hill and the air is clean. The sun glitters and there is a good smell of sun-warmed earth, while beneath them, over the town, lies a pall of smoke. It is so quiet here, birdsong and the whisper of the breeze is all they hear. They are cut off from the din of the town, as if the layer of smoke has clamped a lid on it.

There are hardly any other people here at midday on a Saturday, but when the shadows lengthen groups and crowds of people are sure to arrive. They come to sow and plant on their plots, perhaps to drink a drop of beer at sunset. When Lynette thinks of the kitchen gardens, she almost likes Nottingham. The poor, no, *we* poor, are actually better off here than in other English towns! There are so many pretty little gardens, they are magical. Easter lilies are already in bloom and chives strut on the neighbour's patch. There are colourful sheds and tiny little greenhouses as well, but not on the Rynaldo patch, that is only vegetable garden.

"We must have some dark red autumn asters!" Lynette calls out. "Just a few? Mrs Nuttall's friend gave me some she had to spare."

"I don't know. We must use all the space," says Anna.

"Right beside the fence? They are so pretty."

Lynette takes some tubers from the cloth she had in her skirt pocket and sticks them in the ground.

"All right then." Anna lets herself be persuaded. "That's it, we won't get any further today," she says.

They sigh, lean on their pickaxes and gaze outwards. On the far side of the valley lies the mental hospital. It's a

good thing that it's far away, thinks Lynette. She would not like to go and work in the garden with madmen nearby. Imagine them standing and staring at us through the barred windows! She shudders at the thought. There is a chill in the air.

Once Lynette overheard Father say to Mother that grandmother, her mother, was mad! Mother silenced him. Lynette had never heard her do that either before or since. Could it be true? It was working people and oddballs who went mad, gauchos who had been harmed by sitting in the shade of the ombu tree, not people like us! But actually Lynette knew nothing about her grandmother. What happened to her in the end? She who came from beautiful Cardiff and married a successful and adventurous engineer, ended up among cattle on a farm in barren Tasmania, as far south in the world as Patagonia. Or perhaps she ended up in a hospital like this?

They are both standing gazing in the direction of the asylum when suddenly a piercing scream comes from there. Lynette sees Anna go pale; she is trembling herself. They look at each other. What was that?

"God help me," says Anna and crosses herself.

Tom should have seen her, he did not want her to be engaged in such religious nonsense! But since he left, Anna has become more and more preoccupied with it.

"Poor, poor lady," says Lynette.

It might be a woman, or perhaps a young man? The scream carries, it hangs in the air for a short time before it dies out. There it is again! It is so heart-breaking, Anna's eyes fill with tears.

"Come on, let's go," whispers Lynette, as if somebody might hear her if she spoke normally.

But perhaps they could, for rainy air makes all sounds louder. It has started raining, ice-cold and light, almost like snow, and it is getting dark so that one would not think it was spring. They shiver as they run down towards the town again, run as if someone was at their heels. They have to go to the school to fetch Winnie. It isn't too late, is it? No, the clock in the tower shows only twenty past four. Mar joggles up and down in the sling on her back, but she is not crowing with joy as she usually does. She clings on tightly, wide-eyed and quiet.



AUTUMN

Lynette stands peering into the little mirror over the bed, brushing her hair. It has grown long again, falling over her shoulders in thick, soft curls. Her face has also changed over the summer. Her golden skin is sprinkled with tiny dark freckles and the whites of her eyes gleam. When she and Anna went to dig up potatoes on Hunger Hill yesterday, she saw that her best friend was quite different too. Her delicate body seemed strong. She moved as nimbly as a goat.

The town beneath them lay bathed in evening sunshine and the deep-red asters, which covered the whole fence and hung luxuriantly over the top exactly as they did at home in Mechita, rivalled the shine of Anna's black hair. She went round with a little smile on her mouth.

There was a whole crowd of them up there. Anna had brought her little brothers and sisters, and Lynette had Winnie and Mar with her. Everybody helped. It was so exciting to heave the potatoes up out of the ground and see how many were hanging on the root. There was an abundance. The potatoes hung on white roots as thin as veins of blood or

sewing thread. There were two full zinc buckets for Anna to carry, and Winnie and Angelica took one each. Lynette pushed the wheelbarrow they had borrowed, which was crammed so full that the heap threatened to tumble down. She was not pushing, by the way, but held it back for dear life down the slopes to the town.

They have become strong by being out in sun and summer breeze so much, and from all the vegetable meals they have cooked. Mrs Rynaldo has taught Lynette to cook Italian food, minestrone and spinach cannelloni, Tom's favourite. News of the fighting in France has reached them, about battalions forced back to the Hindenburg Line that spring. But it is clearly going much better for England and the Allies now. The brave pilot, Albert Ball, who was actually from Nottingham, turned their luck. Although he had to sacrifice his own life, he had shown that the Germans had now been beaten in the air as well. Ball was not much older than Tom!

They know that Tom is alive. As recently as a week ago, one of the wounded from the Sherwood Regiment could tell them he had spoken to him; Tom had asked him to bring greetings. He brought a postcard from a place in France too, with greetings from Tom. They felt that the war would soon be won, for real this time, and that Tom might be home before they knew.

Lynette mouths his name carefully to herself, "Tom". She smiles at herself in the mirror, before she realises what she is doing and looks down, blushing. How she looks forward to seeing him again! But they do not know anything definite; she has to be patient.

Anna and Lynette agree to meet in the garden for a little party, their own Harvest Festival. It is Lynette's idea, besides, because in Argentina she had joined in the celebrations among the people in the Puesta festival, in the farmyard between their mud huts. Among the ponies and flies she had been allowed to taste the sweet maté which they drank from a metal pipe. She had watched the young boys dancing to the milonga while the guitars strummed. Right until somebody pulled a knife! Then she had crept away and run to the station and sneaked into her house.

"We'll bake potatoes in the ashes. We just have to be careful that the fire is dying down so they won't get burnt. I can get hold of a little butter," says Lynette.

"Do you really have butter?" Anna is astonished.

"I think Mrs Nuttall has a little," answers Lynette, "but I must take it, she doesn't share things like that these days."

"No, you'd better leave it. I don't like butter all that much," says Anna, obviously shocked by the suggestion.

"Oh yes, you do," grins Lynette.

All at once she sees herself from outside. She sees the Lynette that Anna sees. What has become of her? Is it nice to cheat and steal and carry on as she does? What would Anna say if she knew how much she had stolen? And if Tom came to know it, how would he feel about it? The laughter sticks in her throat.

Weighed down by these thoughts Lynette goes up to Hunger Hill in the evening. She brings only bread and potatoes, not

the precious butter, they have to manage without that. What has the war done to her? She does not rely on anybody any more. Has she stopped believing that Mother will come, or Father, for that matter? Has she unconsciously given up hope that they will ever be a family again?

She can only just see the colours of the deep red flowers in the garden in the moonlight, they look like metal in the autumn darkness, like silver. While she is waiting for Anna, she lights a fire as she learnt at Mechita, from Carmen's mother. Is she ever going to see her again? There is a little gust of wind and the fire flares up, but otherwise it is rather quiet, clear and starry. Anna is going to bring cheese and apples, they will bake them too. She is looking forward to it, in spite of everything, and her mouth waters.

The autumn evening with its huge heaven arches over little Hunger Hill. Suddenly Lynette feels that the world is full of possibilities. She feels as if she is standing in the bows of a ship with a dark sea in all directions, sailing towards the dawn of a day.

"Hello."

It is Anna. She did not see Anna coming up the hill, even though she stood gazing in that direction, so she did not notice the way she was walking, how she dragged her feet and hung her head. Lynette can hear in her voice that there is something the matter.

"What is it?" she asks cautiously.

"Oh, Lynette," howls Anna, laying her head on her friend's shoulder.

"What is it?" Lynette repeats, terrified.

What has happened, it pierces her heart, has something happened to Tom, is he...dead? But she cannot utter that word, which fills her mouth and paralyses her tongue.

"Tom has come home," Anna sobs.

"What are you saying!"

Lynette does not understand, but then the idea strikes her that he is wounded, he cannot walk, he is blind! There are many who have suffered such a fate.

"Is he badly wounded? Tell me what it is, has he become crippled, Anna?"

Lynette forces the question out, her lips feel strangely cold, her mouth numb, and her heart beats wildly.

"He is there," says Anna.

She jerks her head.

"Where?"

"Over there in the hospital." She points.

"Do you mean the asylum?"

"Yes, he is in the mental hospital, because he is no longer himself."

"Oh, no!"

Lynette throws her arms around Anna to comfort her. She is not able to cry herself, she is so shocked.



MEETING AGAIN

"He doesn't want you to visit him."

Anna shakes her head sorrowfully and looks away when she delivers her message. A month has gone by since Tom came back. He is still in the hospital and Lynette has been waiting to hear from him every single day. But Anna is rarely to be seen, she has withdrawn, too. The few times they had met, Tom had not been mentioned.

Why does he not want to meet her? What has she done to him? Can it be that he bears her a grudge because she saw him in the river that time, long ago, that that was really what he meant when he left? But deep down she does not believe that is the reason.

"How is he?" she stammers.

She is standing in the doorway and letting out all the warmth, trying to hold onto Mar, who is wriggling and wants to be put down.

Anna shrugs her shoulders. It is obvious that she feels apologetic and wants to get away from there.

MEETING AGAIN

"I don't understand," says Lynette, bewildered.

It is hopeless, she feels. She must be allowed to see him!

"I have to go home now," says Anna, "mother said you could come and see us one day, if you like," she adds, almost unwillingly.

Her eyes fill with tears. She turns her narrow back away and trudges up Shadow Street. What is it that is so terribly difficult for her, Lynette wonders. She gets a sneaking feeling that it is Anna who does not want her to meet Tom! Perhaps she is lying? But why? It strikes her suddenly that perhaps Anna wants to have him to herself, that she is jealous? Can this be so?

Lynette has no peace. While Mar sleeps sweetly in her drawer and Winnie peacefully in the bed, she stands gazing out of the window up towards Hunger Hill at night. The hospital is not visible, but she has been there, outside, and walked under the trees in the park, and knows that it looks almost like a castle with its spire and tower. She knows exactly where it is. Someone came along while she crept through the garden and she hid herself hastily behind a bush, but it was not Tom walking there with a nun, it was someone else who looked a bit like him from a distance. She tried to glimpse people through the windows. Most windows did not have bars, but it was still impossible to see anything. Should she dare to go in? No, if he so definitely did not want it, she should not push in!

Now she does not know any longer. Perhaps Anna has betrayed her? Then she must have lied to her brother. Would she go so far? No, that cannot be true!

Lynette harbours these thoughts for several weeks. They make her angry and ashamed in turn. How could Anna dare! How could she believe something like that about Anna! Lynette is upset, restless, keeps forgetting what she ought to be doing. One afternoon she forgot to meet Winnie at school. She ran out and searched for her in the November-dark streets with Mar in her arms, who had become much too heavy for this. When the sirens sounded and people streamed out of the factories, she was about to give up. So many people! Perhaps she had found her own way home? But in the end she found her at the station.

"What are you doing here, Winnie?"

"I want to go to Mother," she whispered.

She was sitting rubbing her little whistle, must have forgotten that Mother did not want her to have it. When you turned the whistle over, you could see that on the underside it looked like a gaping face. That was how Lynette felt herself to be these days, like a living question mark. The question had stiffened inside her.

She saw despair in Winnie's eyes, while it was only the thought of Tom that churned in her own head. That overshadowed everything, for all her compassion. She could not go on like this any longer. She had to find out if it was really true that he did not want to see her again.

She decided to go to Anna's house and talk to Mrs Rynaldo. She would not ask her straight out, but perhaps she would reveal something in the way she spoke to Lynette, the way

she met her eyes? Mrs Rynaldo was a woman of few words, her English was not very good either, but it was the facial expression that was the most important, Lynette thought.

Though there are seven of them, eight really, they have an even smaller and more poverty-stricken house than Mrs Nuttall. Yet it is bright and cosy, there is a smell of good food, it radiates warmth. She has been here before, even learnt to cook some dishes. And she has stood outside several times and dreamed of being able to go in. Now it seems almost strange, but she takes a grip on herself and knocks.

As fate would have it, it starts raining at the same moment. Mar begins to cry. Mrs Rynaldo asks them in. They are given hot milk with a drop of coffee in it. Lynette sits looking round, looks and looks and fights tears. She knows what she wants to say, but dares not. Mrs Rynaldo smooths her dark hair, which has become much greyer since last time she was here.

"You carry little one?" she asks in broken English.

"What? Oh yes, because we don't have a pram," smiles Lynette.

"We have! It good you get it."

"May I have a pram?"

"Si, si," nods Mrs Rynaldo. She smiles faintly at Lynette. Then she suddenly leans across the table and strokes her cheek and kisses her on the forehead. It feels like the brush of a wing. Lynette gets tears in her eyes and for a moment her thoughts go to her mother.

She reconsiders. Then Tom cannot be angry with her, at any rate? His mother is not angry with her. She feels

welcome here. Lynette cannot bring herself to ask how Tom is, but when she puts Mar into the little basket on wheels and pushes her home, she does not feel as worried about him, nor about herself either.

A few days later, towards evening, she takes the little pram up the frosty slope to Hunger Hill. Winnie helps her to push. It is already dark, but the gas lamps show the way for a good distance. Where the lights end, they can see the high windows up at the asylum even more clearly.

There he is, sitting behind those windows! Lynette believes that Mrs Rynaldo's gesture of affection was the sign she needed to visit Tom. It must be so.

She explains her errand to the guard at the huge iron gate. Everything here is certainly unusually large. She says she is Tom's cousin. There is nothing improbable about this. She and he really do look a little alike. The guard is not to know that all Tom's cousins live in Italy. So she lies even more, says her name is Rynaldo.

"It's Section Four, Miss, over there, first floor," he says.

He points to the right wing of the building.

"The little ones must stay here at the gate," he adds brusquely.

"You have to wait here, but I will be quick," she explains to Winnie.

As if to show how quick she is, she runs across the stone-flagged square, as slippery as soap. As she rushes along, it strikes her that it is like the courtyard at the Sacred Heart Convent in Buenos Aires. She would have been at school there

now if the whole world had not been turned upside down, if the war had not come and scattered her family like refugees.

There is a broad stone staircase up to the first floor here as well. Her footsteps echo in the stairwell. She becomes more and more uncertain at every step. She walks slower and slower until she stops completely. What if he really does not want anything to do with her?

She recognises him at once. She would have recognised him anywhere, at Victoria Station, Tilbury Quay, at the harbour in Rio, anywhere. That large, dark head, from behind. She forces herself, with knocking knees, across the brightly-lit corridor, past him and up in front of him so he can see her, her knees are about to collapse.

How pale he is! His eyes have sunk deeper in his skull than before and the skin under his eyes is dark blue. Poor Tom! What have they done to you? What have you seen? He looks distantly and uncomprehendingly at her, but then his face contracts with pain and he almost squeaks when he says her name:

"Lynette!"

He half-turns his face away.

"I did not want you to see me like this."

"Oh!" she bursts out.

Lynette feels nausea rising, as if she had been punched in the midriff. She should not have come.

But just as she is going to draw back and go away, he throws himself forward towards her. He burrows his face into her stomach, towards a painful point. She remains standing there forever, she standing and he sitting, until they

feel peace envelop them. Then he puts his arms intimately around her waist. She does not mind whether anyone sees them. She sits down carefully on his lap and presses her lips against his cold, clammy forehead.

She does not know how long they sit like this, together again at last, but for far too long! Winnie and Mar are waiting for her at the gate!

"I have to go now," she whispers, "but I'll come again soon, if you like."

"Yes," he replies hoarsely.

But his eyes become remote.



THE AWAKENING

There is not going to be a proper spring this year. An oppressive gloom has spread itself over everything. Ice-cold rain comes sweeping in from the east with zeppelins which pop up on the morning-grey horizon at shorter and shorter intervals. There are consistently gloomier reports from the Front. The Germans have begun using a poison gas which smells like mustard and kills quickly.

More and more men come home in coffins. There is hardly anyone in the streets who is not dressed in black. How many have to sacrifice their lives? Not to speak of how many become crippled, both in body and mind. Wounds may heal, but those who lose an arm or a leg will never be the same. And what about wounds in the mind? Perhaps they will grow together lop-sided, or continue to suppurate?

Those who had thought the war would definitely be over last year! This spring it is worse than ever. Exhaustion and hopelessness can be read clearly in people's faces. There are so many women who never get rest at night, their thoughts churning round, anxiety dragging them from sleep. So many

men come hobbling back on crutches. They are pushed around the town in a pram like Mar. Or they return home in the form of a piece of paper with black letters on it.

Lynette does not often think of either Father or Mother, she has in any case stopped waiting for them. It is nearly four years since they separated from Father. He is like a picture in an unknown book. But she has been to the Catholic church with Anna and lit a candle for him. It is a long time since she tried writing to Mother about how worried she was about Winnie. She did not get any reply.

At one time Winnie was so ill that Lynette did not know what would happen. She was afraid she might have TB. At one time Winnie longed so much for her mother that Lynette thought it would make her ill. It was terribly difficult to explain why their mother could not come. Why could she not come to visit, at least?

Lynette struggles to get the bare essentials for the household. There are hardly any potatoes left again. In the shops the shelves generally frown emptily at them. And Mrs Nuttall is not at all well. Something shadowy and meek has come over her, which makes Lynette think she is not long for this world. She remembers what Carmen's grandmother was like in the last months of her life. It was as if she was beginning to distance herself from the world while she was still there. She fell into a trance over the cooking pots. She wandered aimlessly along the country lane or the railway line with the ladle in her hand. The only one she spoke to was a fox. It was her fox which she had tamed long before, before she came to Mechita from Xaquixaguana, 'the Valley of Beauty'. Mrs Nuttall's expression is like the fox-woman's.

It seems as if Mother has stopped sending money as

well, at any rate none has come for a long time. The money Lynette had stolen, which she had planned to save up to escape from Nottingham with one fine day, that she had intended to put back in any case, she has had to use. She has found a little job selling newspapers. She can manage that with Mar in the pram. She calls out the name of the evening paper, but can hardly bear to read what is written in it. When she has some spare time, if only a moment, her thoughts circle around Tom.

Nearly every day these past months she has gone to visit him up there in the tower building. There is a view over the whole of Derbyshire from there, but it is impossible to see out of any of the windows. The glass is frosted. There is something very remote about this place. The silence! She is reminded of what Tom had told her about the jail in Milan! He is becoming more and more transparent, Lynette feels. It is not often that he can manage to talk to her when she comes, and even when he says something, it feels as if he is far away. Now and then she feels an impulse to shake him and shout: "Wake up! You are home again now, Tom!"

But he is not really, and she does not know what he is brooding over, either. She knows that Will is dead, but not how he died, and she dares not ask for fear of making everything worse.

One afternoon in May when she goes there, she begins to speculate. She does not want his wounds to bleed again, but what if they close up in the wrong way? She does not even know whether it is possible to think like that. Is it injury? Is it grief?

She takes him by the big, square hand, tries to get a grip and feels how he trembles. He holds his head a little averted, as many of the patients in the gold and white, bare

dayroom do. She looks round and is overcome by a choking aversion. At once it becomes clear to her that there has to be a change, and the sooner the better, if Tom is ever going to be cured and get out of there. This place is not only remote from the world, it is dangerous!

Did she not see a glimpse of some high, white iron benches in there, in the room labeled 'Bath'? She glances over at some of the others who are sitting and dozing or humming to themselves. Is that what Tom will become? She takes hold of his head and turns it so that he has to look at her.

"What happened to Will?" she asks, loud and clear.

Does he understand? There is no reaction. He looks almost as if he is sitting there smiling.

Her sisters are waiting for her; the guard will surely feel there is something suspicious going on; she has been sitting there for over an hour, but she keeps on sitting there, trying to look him in the eye. Then she has a sudden impulse and confesses:

"I have done something terrible, Tom. Are you listening?"

He does not reply, but there is a sort of question in the look he sends her, a surprise.

"I have cheated Mrs Nuttall," Lynette swallows, "I have stolen a lot of money from her."

Now it is her turn to look away. I will come clean about everything!

"And do you know what, Tom, I suspected Anna of lying, of being jealous. I thought it was she who did not want me to visit you!"

Why is she saying this? Does she not think that Tom has enough to bear without her unloading her troubles onto him as well? She forces herself to look at him. He is red in the face and his lips are moving.

"What are you saying?"

Lynette waits with a hammering heart. It is not easy to hear him. But suddenly he begins howling, a terrifying hollow, hoarse sound that comes from deep in his throat, and his face looks even more distorted:

"Wiiill!"

Lynette puts her hand carefully over his mouth, so that no one will come running. She looks around, quick as lightning. All the same, a nun comes hurrying along the corridor, her veil spreading like a sail around her.

"What's going on here, Miss!"

The nun hisses through clenched teeth.

"Have you come here to make him even more miserable? You must leave at once!"

"I was just about to go."

Lynette nods, terror-stricken. What has she started? Behaved as if she knew how much he could bear? What will happen to him now? She quickly presses her cheek against his. It is cold and clammy. She runs out into the damp evening without looking back. It is nearly nightfall.



RETURN

A long time passes before Lynette dares to return. She is afraid of what awaits her at the hospital. What if Sister Sophia really was right, that she had made the pain worse for Tom? Then her presence is the last thing he needs! She would only frighten him.

She has also had to take care of Mrs Nuttall. The doctor had made a home visit, and she had let him in, but he could not tell her what the matter was, only that it was very serious. Perhaps he thought it was unnecessary, since it was probably nearing the end.

Lynette scrutinises Mrs Nuttall's introverted look as she lies in the little bedroom; her eyes have a kind of milk-white film over them. Is it thinkable that it seems protective, that her mental condition and her eyes are shielding her from the hard light of the world? Although they have lived there for so long, Lynette has to acknowledge that she does not know anything about her. Perhaps Doris Nuttall is bearing an old sorrow? Perhaps that is really why she has never been friendly towards them? Never enquired how they were, how they felt

far from home, never comforted them or shown any warmth. Not even when Winnie lay ill did it seem that she had thought for anyone but herself. But perhaps she is like Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights*? He was so merciless to others, even those who were dependent upon him, because he had lost his beloved.

One Sunday a little way into June Lynette makes up her mind to ask Mrs Rynaldo's advice. She must know how he is getting on, if she can dare to visit him again. Mrs Rynaldo nods, but not cheerfully, she is very serious. What does that mean?

"Your sisters can stay with us, here."

"Can they? That is kind of you."

Lynette smiles tentatively. She looks from one to the other, as if she hopes to discover what they are thinking. Anna looks at her in a friendly way. Lynette is still ashamed of having thought so badly of her. Has Anna seen through her? She knows that Lynette has cheated Mrs Nuttall, but does she know how suspicious she is? She meets Anna's eyes, tries to say thank you with her look.

Could it be that Tom is disappointed because she has not been to see him? Perhaps he has been waiting for her after all? Actually, why has she put it off for so long? Lynette jogs up the hill. The sun bakes on the back of the dark Italian dress that has become too small: it only just reaches below the knees and is tight across the chest. Sweat slides under the lining. She hurries past luxuriant bushes and teeming thickets. The growing season has set in at last, and if she had paid any

attention to it, she could almost have seen it budding and sprouting.

It is a strange spring. Crocuses and wild roses flowering at the same time. It feels as if everything is blooming at once, much too late or too early. She breaks off a wild rose to bring to Tom, but changes her mind. She throws it over a hedge. She has become too bold now, overconfident, wanting to sweep in to see him with a rose.

He is standing by the high, frosted window in the dayroom, gazing out. The vibrant green day becomes a rather dim, fuzzy photograph behind the glass. It is so long since she saw him standing upright that she has forgotten how tall he is.

The pulse beats violently in her temples. When he turns round and catches sight of her and smiles, her body becomes numb, her feet will not move forward. She remains standing at a distance, watching him. It seems to her that he looks healthier, is he?

They get permission to go out into the park, but escorted by a nun. Luckily it is another nun on duty this time, but Lynette notices that she watches them carefully. They walk along the white gravel paths, listening to the birdsong and all the sounds of the lush green park, without saying anything to each other. It is almost painful to tread on the marble pebbles, even though they have shoes on. All sounds appear deafening, all impressions strong.

Perhaps she is only imagining that he seems different? She looks quickly up at him to check. She sees the slightly curved nose under the shining eyes. Has a little colour come into his cheeks? When Sister Daphne greets a passerby, Tom

bends down and whispers to her.

She does not take in what he says, only the tone of voice. She recognises it! It is no longer monotonous and strange, as if he was talking and talking on an outbreath until the voice became weak. Can it be true, has he become the good old Tom again? Her own Tommaso Antonio Rynaldo! His features become blurred in the suddenly bright light in her face, his dark body towers over her. She looks at his hand, just beside hers. Does she dare put her hand in his?

Sister follows them and clears her throat loudly.

"I think the outing in the fresh air is over for today."

She speaks stiffly and gestures for them to turn back. Lynette walks like a sleepwalker by Tom's side. It seems as if time has stopped, as if she is moving suspended, without touching the ground. He is not holding her hand, is not close to her at all, but just the same it feels as if he is holding her close. She is anchored in him like a moored hot-air balloon, otherwise she would have been floating about freely. Without him, she would have taken off over the waving treetops. She would have been caught by the wind like the little birds over the pampas, and driven out over the sea, off course.

It begins to rain. The lukewarm rain hits suddenly over the hill. Tom begins running. Where is he going? Sister Daphne cannot keep up, but Lynette sets off, trying to catch up with him again. The nun shouts. But Tom does not slacken his speed. He darts across the lawn and up towards the courtyard behind the main building, disappearing into the heavy rain. It is like a curtain of vapour. Where did he go?

He is standing in a little passage which leads through the building to the yard at the back, and takes hold of her

when she comes running past. He is standing sheltered from the rain. He shakes his hair and brushes water off his jacket. Then he pulls her close to him. Her pulse beats until her forehead aches, her arms become stiff and useless.

“Did you get wet?”

She lays her head against the coarse material of his hospital shirt, presses her trembling lips against his chest and nods.

“Lynette?”

He pushes her away to look at her. It is not sweat streaking his forehead this time, it is only rain. Drops run from his hair down into the shadowy cavity on his upper lip, and onwards over the mouth that shapes her name. He looks straight at her with the dark, open, shining eyes that she recognises so well.



PEACE

It was not the way Lynette had imagined peace when it came at last. She had thought it would be a festivity and a release. She had thought people would dance in the streets with white flags. Or had she really thought that? Could she imagine all the exhausted and wounded and sick people dancing and smiling? Peace came too late: they had waited for it so long that thinking of it had worn them out.

She is sitting with Winnie and Mar in the dark sitting room in Shadow Street, in the godforsaken house that, improbably enough, has been their home for almost four years! Mrs Nuttall is dead. She took her last breath at about the same time as the report of peace came from Versailles.

They are waiting for the hearse this black November day and for Angela, Mrs Nuttall's and Aunt's friend, to turn up for the last time to accompany them to the funeral. Lynette expects this is the last they will see of her, she had not come to visit for the girls' sake. Lynette is exhausted, restless, a new uneasiness has flared up, because even now they have not heard from either of their parents. Perhaps it is too early.

Father might not be back from the Front yet, and Mother will want to wait for him before she comes. Yes, since she has already waited this long! But what if they do not come? And if they come, no, *when*, will Father and Mother recognise them? In the two years that have gone by since they saw Mother, Mar has transformed, Winnie too. And since they saw Father, Winnie has become quite different. She was a little girl then who smiled all the time, chattered away, went her own way and did not always do what he told her to. Golden-brown curls stuck out under her bonnet. Now she is tall, pale and serious, with a tight plait down her back, a pretty but perplexed young girl. Lynette has helped her with her hair and let her take over the Italian dress. Winnie has put the little whistle in her dress pocket; she still has it with her always.

Father has not even seen Mar once! He would surely not have been able to see her before she came here? He will be so surprised when he sees her golden hair, exactly like his. She toddles around and investigates everything, wants most of all to go and mess about in the glowing coal with the poker.

They do not have to freeze indoors in the worst damp cold months of winter, not because there is coal to be had again but because Mrs Rynaldo shares with them. The winter has announced itself already with pouring rain and fog over the river. Lynette does not know what she would have done without Tom's mother. Flour and sugar and milk are back on the shop shelves, but she herself has no money for salt for the food even, although everything is not as expensive any more. But with the help of Mrs Rynaldo, Anna and Tom, Lynette has been able to cook and clean and dress her sisters and herself and keep house. She looks round the dark sitting room. Surely it will never become a cosy home here.

She had scrubbed the sickroom and aired it out while the coffin still stood there and burnt the bedclothes on the riverbank. Tom came in and helped her get rid of the heavy mattress. Even though a mattress is valuable, she wants it gone.

"Are you sure I should take it?"

He is dragging the mattress through the kitchen. She casts an embarrassed glance over it. There is nothing that reminds her more of Mrs Nuttall's worst sides, when she lay about ordering meals, the days she spent with hangovers. She died as she had lived, in a way, babbling, remote. But Lynette had changed her view of her when she became ill.

Tom has become strong and healthy, yet now and then something stiff and sad comes over him which makes her afraid. She dreads that he might change and become distant from her again. But it is like a brief storm which soon passes over.

He has never been in Mrs Nuttall's house before and looks around disapprovingly.

"This is no place to live in, Lynette. Take the others with you and come and live with us instead."

He means it seriously. But why should they go, when they might be fetched away any day now? She does not say it. He does not mention it either; he behaves as if her parents do not exist.

"You are crowded enough already!"

Lynette shakes her head sorrowfully.

"We have to expect that Mother and Father will come and get us soon."

She has to say it. A shadow passes over his face. He kicks the mattress hard, heaves it up with a violent jerk, tucks it under his arm as best he can and stomps out.

"Do as you like!"

He shoots her a sombre look.

Since then she has been restless, not knowing what she ought to do, if she should try talking to him, make him understand. But exactly what does she want him to understand?

"No, Mar, don't play about with the ashes, you get so dirty!"

It is too late; the light blue dress from Tom's little sister is a disgrace. And at the same moment, of course, there is a knock at the door. It is Angela, bringing a gust of cold air. Who is that she has with her? It is Aunt Evelyn!

Lynette has almost forgotten what her aunt looks like. Angela is more familiar than she is, Lynette feels, yet her aunt adopts a tone as if they had seen each other yesterday.

"Are you going to take our coats, Lynette?"

She catches sight of Mar, claps her hands together and bursts out, to Lynette's astonishment:

"Oh dear, how mucky the little one is, a proper little rat!"

Lynette had often thought they should have had their home with Aunt Evelyn, and not in Nottingham! She stares at her, open-mouthed. Aunt tosses her head, snorts sourly and turns to Angela, wanting to know when they can expect the car.

Still Lynette touches Aunt Evelyn's arm. "How are Mother and Father?" she asks excitedly. Her heart is beating wildly, she can hardly stand up.

"Yes, just fine, thank you," replies her Aunt briefly. "You can expect them to come in a couple of weeks' time. There are a lot of arrangements to be made for the journey home, you must understand. Oh yes, I was to greet you and say that."

It has started snowing outside. Lynette sinks down on a chair, looks through the window pane and sees that it is flakes and not drops swirling through the black air. What kind of family do I have, really? she thinks. They have abandoned us. They have treated us like strangers. It has been nearly two years since there has been a word from either of them! Can this be true – is Father 'just fine'? She had not been able to find out whether he was alive even. It is true that in a way she had felt that he was, but she had also thought he had been prevented from making contact. She had believed he would send a message that he was out of danger as soon as he had a chance! Is Mother also 'just fine'? Why has she not answered my letters for such a long time, then? Why didn't she send for us when Mrs Nuttall fell ill? Why didn't she send any money? She could not know that there were kind people helping us.

"Don't you care to ask how your little brother is?" Aunt Evelyn wants to know.

"Yes, of course! How is Alun?" Lynette almost shouts.

"He has become a nice little boy, I can tell you, and seems unusually gifted. Everyone is agreed on that. Your mother and father have decided they will give him the opportunity to go to one of the better schools here in England."

What is Aunt saying now? She remembers that Mother said the same thing. Have they really taken those plans seriously?

"Do you mean that Alun is going to stay in England alone?" she wants to know.

"That is what I just explained," replies her aunt, clearly irritated. "He is going to stay in this country when you all go back to Argentina. Do I have to spell it out to you? Peter has to go back to that uncivilised country again. But Alun is not alone, he is going to go to an excellent school, near where I live."

God help Alun, thinks Lynette, but does not say it out loud: He is only four years old! How will he get on? She takes the soap and tries to remove the worst of the ash from Mar's dress. She rubs hard while her tears stream. She cannot for the life of her make out how her parents think. Don't they understand children at all? The stain only becomes worse, it will just have to stay like that. She picks Mar up in her arms and strokes her hair. The men have come and are carrying the coffin out onto the hearse in the snow.

They stand silently for a minute, all of them, and watch the car crawling up Shadow Street, with Mrs Nuttall on her last journey away from here.

"Little Mar," murmurs Lynette.

She wipes her tears away on her chubby shoulder, which has a sweet smell of milk and soap. Then she rests her gaze on Winnie's pale, thin little face. The sun-filled life in Argentina will do her good, in any case.

In a flash, Lynette sees the courtyard at Mechita in front

of her, the kitchen that Carmen's mother had set up outside. She suddenly smells the scents of oil and gas and the sweet grilled fruit she was given to taste there. She can hear the thrilling music of the guitars which the gauchos played at dusk. Father's sailing boat under the shining cover in the garden pops up in front of her inner eye. The thought of the boat fills her with a kind of hope.

Oh, Rio Grande! They will sail there again and feel the freedom in the wind when it fills the sails and the boat picks up speed. How the water in the big river glitters when the boat cuts through the waves on a fresh summer day! It is summer in Argentina now.



THE JOURNEY

They arrive quite promptly two weeks after the funeral, as Aunt Evelyn said they would. They come in an unfamiliar car. Perhaps they have borrowed it, or has Father bought a new car? Lynette sees it stopping out in Shadow Street, it is conspicuous. At first she does not recognise them. They are formally dressed. It is a long time since Lynette has seen anyone in such fine clothes. The clothes make them seem even more unfamiliar. But when they knock on the door, she understands.

They come into the house, smiling, Mother in front in a green Paris hat and Father behind, he too in a hat – and coloured leather driving gloves. It appears that they have very little time, hardly time to say hello, they do not look around. Yes, Father looks around furtively, clearly shocked, takes a quick peep into the sitting room, but does not take his hat off.

“Hello, Evelyn,” says Mother, “will you help me dress Margiad in these? I am so unused to her now, you know.”

“Hello. Yes, of course, Mother.”

THE JOURNEY

They have brought new outfits for her and Winnie as well, they are to put them on at once.

Lynette carries both the clothes and Mar up into the cold little room. It is very posh material, purple velvet and silk for Mar! Has she ever worn anything like it? Lynette struggles to dress Winnie in the thin pink stockings and fasten them to the silk belt. Her fingers feel rough and stiff against the smooth stuff. They have bought a blue brocade dress for Lynette, silk stockings and a new dark blue coat with a velvet collar. The coat is like the one Mrs Nuttall sold; when it lies on the bed it is as if it had never been gone.

Winnie cannot believe her own eyes. She has received a golden-brown velvet dress exactly the same colour as her hair. She twists and turns in front of the cracked mirror. At last she beams, looks at Lynette with tears in her eyes and smiles:

“Look, look how pretty I am,” she whispers.

They help each other, admire each other. The transformation is total! Who is this little girl with the golden hair in the purple dress? Aunt Evelyn should see her now. She is so far from being a rat, she looks like a princess in a fairytale!

“Just leave the old clothes!” Mother shouts up to them.

“Hurry up now, children!” There it is, Father’s voice, easily recognisable.

The homely, impatient tone surprises Lynette all the same. It seems so natural for him to come in and begin shouting at them, as if nothing had happened, as if he had ignored the four long years he had been away.

She stands for a while, wonderingly, with the old clothes she has bundled up in her hands. Then she throws them away. They are to leave them behind. Do their parents expect that those four years can simply be left behind here as well, just like that? She searches the pockets, to make sure. What has Winnie forgotten in her apron? Yes, here is her whistle! She fishes it out, is on the point of shouting after her, but puts the whistle into her new brocade purse instead.

The others are sitting in the car, waiting. Lynette follows hesitantly after them. Father toots the horn at her, but she turns round and looks for a while, gazes at the black door to say goodbye. Of all the doors in the street, this is the only one that is not painted in a cheerful colour!

They drive over the bridge, up past the station, the way to school. Lynette wants to point out the baker's and butcher's and greengrocer's, the wine shop that was bombed. Outside the ironworks stand several of the workmen who have no jobs any more. They are leaning on their crutches, some missing an arm or leg. She wants to point out the beautiful, towering castle, the pride of the town, and Hunger Hill, the only place she has felt at home here.

But Father is in such a hurry that he curses and hits the steering wheel, as she remembers he used to do when he was irritated, because they are stuck behind one of Golden's trucks, which is obviously trying to find a place to park and going very slowly. He has no time to look around. He swerves past, but should have taken it more easily because the road is not free of ice. He blares the horn. People stare at the car, which is almost flying over a bump.

"Father!"

Lynette has to shout for him to hear her, the engine is making so much noise and the wheels are scraping along the railings of the bridge, and he is so tense.

"Faaather!"

She taps him cautiously on the shoulder.

"What is it?" he replies.

He turns as quick as lightning and shoots her a sharp glare.

"Can you stop here, please?"

"Stop? Are you crazy? Don't you understand we are late? Do you think I am driving like this for fun?"

Four years have gone by, thinks Lynette. She has waited for him for four years, and now he is so short of time that he can't stop for a moment for her sake! Suddenly she feels herself to be a piece of cargo, a prettily packaged parcel. But she is not exactly being handled with care!

Yet she does not give in. Here is the Rynaldo family's house. She wants to get out here, she must, she must say a proper thank you to them. It would have been unheard of before, but now she opposes her father.

"I want to get out! There's something I have to do."

Her voice is quiet and firm. Father brakes angrily so they jerk forward and have to brace themselves.

"Whatever it is, do it quickly," he yells. He is red in the face, gripping the steering wheel with white knuckles. It is not so dangerous, she notes, it does not affect her any more.

In the rear view mirror she sees Tom coming down the

street, going straight past them without glancing at the car. Why should he? He is not impressed by the rich and obviously does not know who is sitting there. She slips out carefully behind him and follows him towards the house. She is about to call out, but does not. Instead she sprints up beside him and pulls off her hat.

“Tom!”

He does not recognise her immediately. He takes a step backwards, stares at her.

“Lynette, I could hardly tell it was you!” he says.

Then he looks back at the car and realises the situation. With a distant expression on his face, he puts out his hand. He swallows.

“Well, goodbye then,” he says quietly, “and have a good journey,” he adds politely.

“Evelyn, come now!” It is Mother.

Lynette shakes her head slowly, lifts her hand up as if to stop the noise, close it out. Her father jumps out and skids on the slippery cobblestones in his city shoes. He staggers, but does not fall, holds onto his hat and gesticulates with the other hand. What does he really want? He obviously does not understand anything! Or perhaps he has perceived something? Because he slackens his pace and waves to the others. They come tip-toeing cautiously, Winnie with her head held high; she is walking in a different way that Lynette has never seen before. Mother is holding Mar in her arms in a slightly awkward way, looking almost frightened.

“This is Tom,” says Lynette.

Tom bows, but not deeply.

“Did you mean it?” she whispers to him, “what you said about wanting me to come and live here?”

He lets his hand slide through his hair and looks down. Then he raises his head and meets her eyes. He nods dumbly. There and then Lynette makes up her mind. There and then she says goodbye inside herself, not to Tom but to the others, to Winnie and Mar. To her dear, pretty, sad little sister Winnie and obstinate, life-loving Mar! It is hard to understand how that pale infant has become such a strong little child in the time she has been in Nottingham. Hard, dark years they have been. Indeed, the sad Winnie has disappeared now, as she looks straight at Lynette, smiling encouragingly. They will manage without her, but can she manage without her sisters?

Lynette smiles back. Then she looks at her high-class parents. Father tips his hat, severely, and Mother nods weakly. They look strangely at Tom. Lynette feels she does not know them, not really, not the way they think, not the reasons why they are as they are. Has she ever known them? Has she ever been like them? She is not like them now, anyway.

Winnie comes right up to her and Tom. It looks as if she understands what is going to happen.

“I have the whistle here, you forgot it,” says Lynette and digs the whistle out of the purse.

Winnie shakes her head slowly.

“You have it, Lynette. You’re going to need it now.”

“Thank you,” says Lynette. “Have a good journey!”

Her voice quavers but she feels far from afraid. She

longs for the sunshine of Mechita, for the endless white pampas where the shadows are drawn so sharply that it appears they will be there for ever, but it is only on the retina, only in dreams that they do so. A country is not worth loving. It is love that gives meaning to reality. Lynette has to go her own way. That is why she wants to stay here, with Tom.



Hanne Bramness

Hanne Bramness is a poet, editor, translator and novelist. Born in 1959, she published her first collection of poetry in 1983 and has followed this with ten other collections, four of them for youth and children. Her selected poems, *Det står ulver i din drøm* (*Wolves are standing in your dream*), were published in Norwegian in 2008.

In 2007 Shearsman Books published a selection of her poems in English, *Salt on the eye, selected poems* and in 2012 *No Film in the Camera* appeared, a collection of shorter and more lengthy prose poems about photographs.

Her many translations include works by William Blake, Mina Loy, Kamala Das, Denise Levertov, Selima Hill and Frances Presley.

She was awarded the Norwegian Poetry Club Prize in 1996 and the prestigious Dobloug Prize by the Swedish Academy in 2006. In 2012 she was awarded Wergeland's Oar, a prize for her work for poetry.

The novel *Lynette's Journey* originally appeared as *Lynettes reise* in 2003.



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About Eklavya

Eklavya is a non-governmental registered society working in the fields of education and people's science since its inception in 1982. Its main aim is to develop practices and materials that are related to a child's environment, and are based on play, activities and creative learning.

Eklavya has extended its area of work to publishing titles on education, popular science, teaching modules, activity books and literature for children and books on wider issues of development. We also publish three periodicals: *Chakmak*, *Sandarbh* and *Srote*.

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